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HELEN KEY.

A fairy tale, only
— I feel it.

If there's another world he lives in bliss
If there is none, he made the best
of this.
Burns.

The silver swan who, living, had no
note
When death approached unlocked
her silent throat.
Leaning her breast against the
Teedy shore,
She sang her first & last, & sang
no more.

Oh thou invisible spirit, if thou
hast no name To be Known by,
let us call thee devil !



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Tangled Trinities

By

Daniel Woodroffe

Author of

'Her Celestial Husband'

'Look, you have cast out Love! What Gods are these
You bid me please?
The Three in One, the One in Three? Not so!
To my own Gods I go.
It may be they shall give me greater ease
Than your cold Christ and tangled Trinities.'

RUDYARD KIPLING

London
William Heinemann

1901

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PART THE FIRST

CHAPTER I

‘THE mothers are going to have a tug of war.’

‘How awful!’ groaned Mrs. Paton. ‘Isn’t it enough fag to be a mother, and having achieved that, wouldn’t you think, with a thermometer at 96, they would rest on their laurels?’

She looked plaintively about her with her full, rather faded blue eyes, after uttering this sentiment; but Mr. Steele, his soft clerical felt hat on the back of his head, his eager dark eyes fixed on the distant groups, scarcely seemed to hear her. He smiled and began speaking rapidly, with a half-lisp or catch in his voice that was habitual to him.

‘Jane,’ said he, turning from Mrs. Paton and addressing his sister-in-law, ‘cannot you organize it? They are all eager to begin, and unless someone starts them they will waste time.’

‘Think of just having left the wash-tub and being “eager to begin”!’ murmured the blonde woman again.

But Mrs. Case put aside her knitting, and at once stood up. She was a little, wiry woman, fair-haired and colourless, with small hips and narrow shoulders, and a deep buckram belt she wore showed no

more curve than if it clasped a stick. There was little difference in size between her flat waist and chest, enclosed in some hot-looking fabric of an unpleasant shade of mouse colour. On her head she wore one of those large boat-shaped hats, trimmed with nondescript foliage and wings, which are adopted by country ladies of a certain age as a compromise between a hat and a bonnet, and which give them that ‘old girl’ look that has led Frenchmen to draw awful pictures of the English mamma.

‘ You see,’ explained Mr. Steele to her, ‘ the boys’ sack-race is to follow, and, after that, married women against single, and then a married egg-race against single. If we don’t get forward we shall have no time ; they are so long arranging everything,’ he said, pausing to wipe his forehead under his hat with a blue cotton pocket-handkerchief.

He was a curious-looking man to find in clerical clothes in the Vicarage grounds of Borth, this little Kentish village. His eyes, dark and handsome, had that red look in the iris and that warm tint in the white which indicate an admixture of dark blood ; his hair, of a very dark brown, almost black, had a close curl in it, and grew low on his forehead ; he wore a moustache, and the rest of his face was clean-shaved. His complexion, too, was dark, and, against his seedy black alpaca coat, looked hot and dingy. As he stood there, resting in the shade for a moment, he glanced restlessly about in a way that was a habit with him.

‘ Whew !’ he said, wiping his face and stowing

away the handkerchief in the breast-pocket of his skimpy coat, where it made a bulge, ‘the thing, you know, is going splendidly, but what a lot of work! Where is Asta?’ he inquired, with his red-brown eyes, never still a moment, raking the landscape.

‘Over there under the trees,’ replied Mrs. Paton, indicating with her parasol a distant part of the field. ‘She doesn’t seem to be set on treats.’

Mr. Steele gave a slight sound of disapproval with his lips.

‘I can never get her to take the smallest interest in my work,’ he replied. ‘Asta seems always in a dream. Were you here this time last year? No, I remember, you were in London. Well, Asta nearly killed one of the infant class. The child, sitting with its bare legs stretched out before it, held out its mug for a second cup, and when it thought it had got enough, withdrew it. Asta, in one of her dreams, continued the stream of boiling tea on to the child’s legs! It’s no use if one does that sort of thing,’ he continued gravely.

‘Well, if someone’s legs must be scalded, let it be a villager’s,’ murmured Mrs. Paton languidly; ‘for of all the thankless set of creatures——! How you can fag over these things when you know that, when all’s done, they rather dislike one than not!’

‘I don’t know’—Mr. Steele’s eyes restlessly turned from one to another of the distant groups of pleasure-makers—‘I don’t know that they do; and, besides, it is one’s duty. I don’t expect they are worse than

others ; and I don't know why they should dislike me. I don't, in fact, think they do, for they've had now, in this one year—let us see, what have they had? —their Girls' Friendly party, their boys' cricket-club tea, constant mothers' meetings, four penny readings, a library tea, a Confirmation tea, a treat now, and they'll have one again at Christmas.'

'Yes, they like the buns and things, but, all the same, they resent your being able to give them ; it makes them furious to think you can do it.'

'Perhaps so, but Christ loved the poor ; it was for these very people—'

But the remainder of Mr. Steele's sentence was destined to be cut short. Mrs. Case, as he spoke, had been approaching them over the hot, yellow grass, and now, a tired, draggled-looking object, addressed him from under a striped brown cotton sunshade.

'I wish you would come, Robert. I cannot get them into order, and I'm nearly scorched. The women don't seem to feel it, but Oh ! And all the heavy ones have got on one side, and are going to pull against poor little Mrs. Rice and Mrs. Maylet, and small people like that.'

'I had better go,' said the Vicar, compressing his mouth in a determined manner.

'Yes, do. Where's Asta?' she continued fretfully.

'Over there. You know she never does take much interest in these treats.'

'And you would think that this was just what a young girl *would* enjoy !' murmured Mrs. Case,

putting back a lock of her pale hair from her forehead, damp with exertion and fatigue, and preparing to go back into the sun with her brother-in-law.

Mrs. Paton watched them going off into the glare thrown up by the almost burning grass, and saw them join the group about eighty yards away. The Vicar's scanty alpaca coat was at once surrounded by women and children. Amongst them, smarter and lighter of hue, she could see the 'teachers'; these were flitting about very actively, and, by their aspect in the distance, Mrs. Paton, as a woman of the world, felt that they were combining help to the Vicar with flirtations with the schoolmaster and organist, and such other eligibles as were available. But how hot! she thought, and oh, what a curious thing to take pleasure in! What was pleasure? How would a dictionary define it?

From where Mrs. Paton sat she could see the little collection of dwellings forming the village, while at her left stretched a band of elms enclosing the Vicar's garden and his field where she was sitting, the latter only used for festivities. The field and ground were thus belted with trees except in two places; in one of these gaps there was a haw-haw dividing her own grounds from those of the Vicarage. But the village lay in such a basin that she could see around it the chalk hills with their hollows radiantly blue in the August sun. Before her lay the Vicarage—a commonplace, solid-looking building of Kentish rag, its garden straggling and ill-kept, and opposite its front-door a circular bed of

capers, over whose blossoms pale butterflies quivered in the heat.

On the hot, dried grass of the Vicarage field preparations had been made from an early hour that day ; the Vicar, with a cabbage-leaf under his hat, and the hat itself set on the back of his head, making a halo round the pallor of his dark face, had been there all the morning erecting tents, putting out the Vicarage tables, planting hurdles for races, helped by Mrs. Case and a village boy. The juvenile natives of Borth had joined him there about three, the mothers at four, and the fathers were yet to come.

Such of the children as Mrs. Paton had seen at close quarters had looked, poor things, very hot, but intensely happy and clean, with eyes taking in every detail of the field—the merry-go-round, the see-saw, and, above all, the tables on which the crockery was already being laid for tea. In the shade the white cloths and the china looked delightfully grey and cool.

‘Gracious me, what a distressing day !’ murmured Mrs. Paton.

She looked hot and uncomfortable ; her once yellow hair had become faded and mixed with grey, and was now an ugly colour ; but she wore it in the fashion which the beautiful Queen Alexandra has popularized, and which has been adopted by everyone since her charming oval face made it the mode. Her figure was stout, and she wore a loose black silk blouse ; her eyes were blue, and set on the surface of her round, querulous-looking face ;

her tone of voice was languid and also querulous, like the vertical line between her eyes.

'Dear me!' said she, examining the distant group through a lorgnette, 'they are coming towards me.'

The blue Kentish hills appeared to be shivering nearer in the sun, the glittering haze seemed to increase every moment, and over the yellow field the noisy band was marching—the alpaca coat in the middle of a confused crowd of women and children, Mrs. Case, with her flat figure in its mouse-coloured gown on the outskirts, shielding her face from the sun with her parasol, teachers in white blouses and pink skirts, teachers with hats full of roses and others in coquettish sailor-hats.

'We are coming to invade you,' said Mr. Steele jocularly, with a smile on his hot face; 'we can't let you have the only cool spot.'

And when he got nearer he began explaining quickly, with the little clip or catch in his words:—

'We couldn't prevent all the heavy-weights going to one side, so we have thrown up the tug and are going to have a mothers' race instead. We will have the race round you in this nice shade. Oh, do go away, boys!' this to the youths who were crowding round. 'Now Mrs. Andrews and Mrs. Hawker and Mrs. Brown, don't talk so much, but come and stand where I am. Now Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Luck go next, and Mrs. Blaker and Mrs. Todd. Now there we are; that's as it should be. What is it, Albert Luck?'

A large, clumsily-built boy of about sixteen, in

very smart Sunday clothes and a blue cravat, was seen hurrying forward over the almost burning grass, his legs seeming to shiver in the haze. There was about him the distraught, desperate air of a person bearing a reprieve.

‘The butter, sir ! It’s been left in the sun, an’s well nigh gone—turned to ile.’

‘Put it in the shade then.’

‘I did, zur, and Miss Asta’s dog took part of it strite.’

‘This is shameful neglect on someone’s part. Where are those who have charge of the tables and food ?’ asked Mr. Steele, looking angrily round on his assembled parishioners.

‘The mothers oo’ve taken the trys is in this ’ere rice,’ suggested a freckled little girl.

‘Silence, girl ! A little less talk and more action would have prevented this. Where have you put it now ?’

‘I ’aven’t put it anywheres. Miss Asta’s dog——’

‘Oh, someone go and see to it,’ said Mr. Steele fretfully—‘someone that isn’t a fool ! And now let’s get this race over. Your right foot forward, Mrs. Hawker, and don’t stand yards before the others. Now, then ! One to be ready, two to be steady, and three to be—— Good gracious, boy ! what is it *now* ?’ asked the Vicar with irritation.

A small, hungry-looking boy had lifted his hand in the way ‘teacher’ is invariably saluted before being addressed, and was now heard explaining in a shrill, broken pipe that, there being twenty ladies in the competition, and all standing in a line to run round

a given object, the lady nearest that given object must infallibly win.

'Confound you, boy! Are you running this treat or am I?' exclaimed Mr. Steele indignantly. 'I cannot do with these boys. Asta must help me. Here, Asta! Asta!'

In answer to the call a spot of white was seen to detach itself from the landscape and to come forward over the shadows thrown by the trees. On nearer view, the spot took the form of a white perpendicular line with a pale-brown dot above it; but within speaking distance the line of white fluttered and spread itself into a clinging and tumbled white dress, with a dark, charming face above it. She came slouching forward, a railway novel under her arm, her little feet clad in old blue tennis shoes.

'What is it, papa?' she inquired tenderly, and looking earnestly out of her beautiful eyes.

They were eyes such as one very seldom sees in England—burning, dark, intense, meant to express passion, tenderness, hatred; under them a greyish purple stain, giving an exquisite languor and sorrow to their expression.

'Now, Asta,' said her father, 'I want you to help me. I want you to take the first Class of boys to your aviary to see the young canaries. You'll like that, boys, won't you?' he asked, addressing the multitude. 'And if, Asta, you could manage the second as well— Anyhow, take the first Class—take Albert Luck and Johnnie Jones, anyway; let me be shut of *them*.'

'Asta,' said Mrs. Case, coming forward and speaking in an annoyed undertone, 'I wish you would wear a petticoat under that limp cotton skirt. If you only saw yourself! If there were a young man here it would be quite——'

'There never is a young man here,' replied the girl, glancing under her brows at Mrs. Case.

'But you should none the less be prepared,' argued her aunt.

'Yes, Asta,' observed Mrs. Paton's sleepy voice from the basket-chair, 'you should be ready in case one of these blessings should alight in the parish.'

'There may be a young man this very night,' observed Mrs. Case, in much the same voice as an astronomer might announce a possible transit of Mercury. 'Two officers from Chatham are staying with the Dalmers, and what is more likely than that they should be at the magic-lantern to-night? And I can positively almost count your ribs under that bodice, while your legs are simply——'

'The officers won't come to the lantern,' drawled Mrs. Paton; 'and if they do it will be dark, and they can't count either her ribs or her petticoats. Besides, smart young men only notice married ladies nowadays.'

'Come!' said Asta imperiously, breaking through the discussion and addressing the boys; and followed closely by the first Class, including the mathematical Johnnie Jones, she was seen skirting the garden wall and unlocking a gate in it that led to the back premises.

CHAPTER II

'OH, dear, I am tired! Did you ever see such a fright?' murmured Mrs. Case. 'And, all the while, she has a new dress by the very woman who made this. *Her* dresses never cling to the figure.'

'No, they don't.'

'I think there is such immodesty in a girl showing every line, and there is nothing a young man more—'

'As Asta said,' interrupted Mrs. Paton, 'young men need not be catered for here.'

'My dear Mrs. Paton,' said Mrs. Case, resting her tired figure in the mouse-coloured dress on a packing-case that had been used in some sports, 'there is by no means such a lack of men as you and Asta say. Now, if Asta only chose to settle herself, there's Mr. Safford, the curate of Whepstead; he has been most pressing in his attentions to her.'

'Do you mean the little man in the divided skirts?' asked Mrs. Paton languidly from her cushions.

'I know nothing about that; I only know he's a very clever man. He goes in for archæology, and has even suggested that Asta should belong to the Archæological Society. Of course the bystanders—it was at a tennis party—didn't see the point, but I did.'

'And what was it ?'

'To see more of her, of course. I could see the lemonade in his hand quiver as he looked full into Asta's eyes ; it was one of those unmistakable looks that even a Savage would understand.'

'And what did this particular Savage reply ?'

'She said it made her flesh creep to think that anything or anyone was past and dead, and done for. She said archæology made her shiver ; she didn't like ruins, and considered age a drawback to anything.'

'That was a nasty one for the poor man, for he's well on towards fifty ; he's a ruin himself. I should think the lemonade trembled again after that speech.'

'It's all very well,' returned the other testily. 'You, no doubt, as a girl, had excellent opportunities. You were taken up for the London season, and, when you married General Paton, you, no doubt, might have had others. But here's Asta ; she never leaves this place ; she must marry here or not at all ; and why should she throw aside a man who is a University man, and a gentleman, and a good man ? She'll get no better, I know that.'

'The reflection that one will get no better is not an incentive to passion,' murmured Mrs. Paton in her complaining voice.

'He is a man whose life we know, which is more than can be said for some. He is a total abstainer, and his housekeeper herself told me, so I know it to be a fact, that she boils his barley-water after a receipt of his own ; and, even in winter, he will

have—I forget what amount—four quarts, I think—during the day.'

'Perhaps Asta has heard about the barley-water,' suggested Mrs. Paton.

'I tried to point out to her that Amy Williams was very anxious to marry him, hoping that that would turn her; but she has no natural womanly instincts. She merely said "Let her!"'

'I should leave her alone,' yawned Mrs. Paton, 'and not precipitate matters. She has gorgeous eyes.'

'The secret of it all lies in her bringing up,' continued the other—'her want of English training and of religious training. What is the life of a girl in St. Lucia, a wild-cat place like that? And, then—imagine it—left at eight, when my sister died, to the care of two spinster sisters of Robert's, Roman Catholics, as all his family but himself are. He, of course, instructed them that she was not to be brought up in *their* faith, and, to do them justice, they did not try to influence her that way, but neither did they teach her anything else. Of course, as an army chaplain, Robert couldn't take the child about with him. It was an unavoidable misfortune.'

'It was that, I suppose, that made him settle down here at last?'

'Yes; and getting this was a great stroke of luck. This living is in the gift of Sir Geoffrey Danvers. They met in Malta, and Sir Geoffrey took a great fancy to Robert. If she had been any longer in the West Indies I don't know what she would have

become. Then there's old Judith ; she is most exasperating.'

' Judith is not beautiful, but she is a picturesque object about your village, and would be more so if she would only wear her national dress. What, by the way, is her national dress ? Beads, I fancy.'

' Do not joke about her ; you don't know what she is as an inmate.'

' Then send her away.'

' Where can we send her to ? Who'd have her ? We can't pay the passage back to St. Lucia, and, in the meantime, Judith practically rules the kitchen. I don't believe the creature has any real moral feeling under her wool as an Englishwoman would have. She is as unpractical and wild as Asta herself, and, what is worse, she will copy people's hats ; we cannot break her of it. She sits all day in her room in the winter, and all the summer in the garden and orders the servants about. She says she will stay with Asta till death.'

' How very awkward !'

' She simply adores the child. The consequence is no one may correct Asta ; for, if a word is said, she flies into a rage, and goes muttering about the house till I'm afraid of her. She *will* go to the village dances, and, as the wretched creature is amusing, or unusual, or something, all the young men dance with her.'

' She feels herself a social success. I don't wonder she wants to go.'

' You will have your joke, Mrs. Paton, but it is no

joke to me. Dear me! time is going'—consulting a watch in a worn leather bracelet. 'I must go and see about the tea.'

'Can I help you?' asked Mrs. Paton, but without making the slightest move, and looking up querulously at the face crowned by the boat-shaped hat, the owner of which was now standing ready once more to brave the heat; and then she continued: 'I will if you would like, though I fear I know little about school treats. I shall perhaps be more hindrance than help, eh? *Perhaps* I had better not.'

Then they became sensible of some figures approaching them.

'Here is Asta,' said Mrs. Paton. 'How funny she looks—and the boy with the blue tie—just look! What has happened?'

'Asta!' cried Mrs. Case.

'It's all right, aunt,' replied the girl's voice. 'Albert Luck was picking me water-lilies, and overreached himself, and I and Johnnie Jones drew him out with a rake, lilies and all. It's all perfectly right.'

Asta, green up to the waist, was approaching them, beside her a group of excited boys, Albert in their midst, covered with slime and water-weeds.

'What is it?' cried Mrs. Case excitedly. 'Is anyone drowned? And why did you go near the water? Asta, you are too distracting—you really are!'

Mr. Steele now appeared with a rope in his hand, and several school-teachers and children fresh from some game.

'Asta, have you actually managed to get into trouble in that simple thing I asked you to do? This *is* disobedience. If you had remained in the aviary this could not have happened. What did I ask you to do? "Show them the canaries," were my words, and now look at you.'

Asta gazed at her father with a half-sullen tenderness in her strange eyes, so like his own, and said nothing.

At this moment the words of a part-song were wafted towards them. The voices seemed to proceed from a clump of elms close at hand. They belonged, in fact, to the infant Band of Hope, who, carefully coached by the organist, had prepared a song as a species of oblation to their Vicar. Foremost were children of eight and nine, but at the end were small, toddling infants, who, looking supremely joyous, held each other by the hands for support as they tried to march. All were smartened up in clean frocks and pinafores and their Sunday boots.

'We go on Sunday to the church,
So happy, happy, happy !
'Twixt tasks and play divide each day,
So happy, happy, happy !
And thus we sing our roundelay,
So happy, happy, happy !'

CHORUS.

Oh dear, we are so happy, so happy, so happy !
Oh dear, we are so happy, so happy, happy, happy !

'Our Vicar and our teachers, too,
So happy, happy, happy,
We love them all, so kind and true,
So happy, hap—— !'

'Children,' cried the Vicar, with a miserable smile, 'this is no time to rejoice. Look at your comrade—look at him!'

Their comrade at this moment was not an agreeable spectacle. The innocents who were near enough to see him and catch the Vicar's words remained as if petrified, gazing open-mouthed, and the song died on their lips; but from the tail of the procession still floated the chorus, sung by the younger children. 'So happy, happy, happy,' they caroled with insistent bleat.

Suddenly, from the rear, a little girl in a coarse, white-embroidered frock separated herself from her companions.

'It's brother Albert, an' he's drownded!' she cried.

'Shet yer 'ead, Maudie! I ain't drownded,' Albert protested with angry sheepishness.

'He's drownded, he's drownded!' insisted his sister, throwing herself forward and clasping his legs.

'What, you young toad!' exclaimed Mrs. Luck; 'you want to muck up your frock, too! As if Bert's suit wasn't enough, an' me toilin' an' moilin' all day—ah! an'll 'ave to till the end. Take that!'

As a sounding smack fell on the poor child, three more of the infant class, bewildered at the scene, burst into tears.

The Vicar gazed about as if distraught.

'All this is through disobedience,' he said—'yes, through disobedience, and—and tiresomeness generally. If only—'

Mr. Steele's observations, however, were cut short. The women setting out crockery on the tables had noticed that something unusual was afloat, and had run to the spot with the energy which had so surprised Mrs. Paton. All had advice and condolences to offer.

'The Brennans' Alfred,' said Mrs. Rice, 'was took with the rabbit typhoid, an' was gone in a week, through 'im an' 'is brother slippin' into just such another pond with just such another stink to it, and— Bert Luck, don't sauce me! I should 'ope I know, that laid 'im out with me own 'ands. I should get 'im 'ome, Mrs. Luck, dear, if it was me.'

'Ere's the forthers comin',' said the little freckled girl, with dramatic effect. 'The forthers is comin' in by the West gite.'

All eyes were now turned to the point indicated, whence some black-coated men were seen to be wending their way in straggling groups.

'Ah, an' 'is father'll warm 'im up for this,' observed Mrs. Luck. "'E'll learn 'im!'

Through the din that followed Mrs. Paton's voice could be heard observing that the picturesque was not enough encouraged in this village, that Albert looked quite like a river-god now—river-weeds suited his style. Wasn't there someone of the name of Narcissus who fell in love with his own reflection in a stream or pond?

CHAPTER III

‘ DEAR WILTSHIRE,

‘ I had no idea that an *ingénue* was to be found anywhere, but in this Arcadian place they seem to have grown one. Mrs. Dalmer does not arrive home till to-morrow, so that in the meanwhile it is a bachelor establishment; and after dinner last night we wandered out and finally arrived at a magic-lantern entertainment, a function which it appears Mr. Steele, the Vicar here, gets up for his parishioners twice a year, and here, in the person of his daughter, the *ingénue* was discovered. A very natural place you will say. The villagers sat round, her papa worked the lantern, and the *ingénue* looked on in silence.

‘ Steele *père* is a very singular-looking person—more than a slight touch of the tar-brush, I should say; his frizzly hair and red-brown eyes look like West Indian blood. Miss Steele is most uncommon-looking, with eyes that are absolutely dazzling. I take to myself credit for having discovered her, as I had to do it by the very uncertain light given out by Mr. Steele’s representations of the man with the muck-rake, and other scenes considered improving to the morals of the villagers; but, once I had discovered her, I got Dalmer to introduce me.

' He tells me that Mr. Steele is an eccentric, always doing stupid things and running counter to his Bishop and the clergy generally. We had rather a specimen of his blundering that night, for, in the middle of the performance, the oil gave out. That was the moment when I discovered Miss Steele, for she made some observation to her father from the seat behind, and I turned round.

' Such a dusky face—such eyes !

' Do you remember the French-Creole girls in Jamaica, and how Johnny Brereton went stark raving mad over one of them—that little wine-merchant's daughter ? They are the women who, most of all, combine the spiritual with the passionate ; it is their thinness, their darkness, and the intense earnestness of their expression. To me they are the only women who can give a refinement to passion and lift it above the commonplace of a sentimental attachment or the brutality of a mere sexual instinct. One never thinks of their fading, or becoming scraggy or fat, though they are really the women who wear worst ; they are generally hags at thirty-five, just when an English woman, having married and achieved the conventional two children, is settling into her stride.

' It is very curious, this girl never smiles. Her teeth are beautifully even, and her mouth resembles that of the lady in Solomon's Song. It is strange, but she gives me the impression of a Savage—of someone with instincts merely, or, at least, of an appalling innocence or ignorance. Her uncon-

ventionality is wonderful, and her conversation is nearly as unexpected as her eyes. She is shockingly clothed, and what she would be like deprived of her awful draperies I know not. A grey gingham, built in diabolical fashion, village-made boots, a damnable erection of muslin and roses on her head—— But such is life, and when we find good boots the complexion is too often from Truefitt's.

‘Tell Fitz to see if he cannot manage to look me up a horse while he’s away, only I don’t want any more dealings with Viston. I don’t want to bring up that old troop-horse to the Agricultural Hall again, nor do I want to parade again with the old crock if I can help it. Anyhow, for the tournament I must have something decent.

‘Young Burton is in great form with his banjo, and makes love religiously to everything of a suitable age far and near ; *i.e.*, thirty-eight or forty summers must have passed over their lovely heads before they interest him. He is as particular on this point as some people are to the time game has been kept. My dark-eyed girl of Paradise is therefore too young by about eighteen years, and is safe from the Hotchkiss of his affections.

‘Yours very sincerely,
‘GEORGE SKENE.’

CHAPTER IV

ASTA STEELE, restless, and with the untrammelled walk of a panther, stole to her window and threw open the shutters. Her skin this morning, after sleep, had that peculiar morbidezza which is so marked in those of West African blood. The warmth of sleep had sucked the colour from her cheeks and forehead, and under her eyes the dark stains, seen against the warm pallor of her flesh, appeared a brownish purple.

The air was still and close ; the leaves of the elms made no sound, and outside, in the Vicarage field, the débris of yesterday's amusements still lay about, having that air, almost of sadness, which surrounds the remnant of a past gaiety.

There, under the trees, were the deal tables and some forms brought from the Vicarage ; there was the striped tent where Mr. Steele had given the prizes ; and here, lying about, were packing-cases, ropes, papers, and beneath them the grass, trampled brown by the children's feet. Round all this, like the walls of an amphitheatre, lay the Kentish hills, distinct, and seeming very near in the clear, early morning light.

All these things in turn Asta looked at with a vague discontent. Below her, a little to her left,

was the village church where presently she would be sitting. She leaned far out and looked down on it, dreaming, and as one very far off.

Asta had had for the last two years much the same bringing-up as the ordinary English girl, but under this conventional education, this veneer, lay a nature that could never be the same as theirs. Race divided them. Not so very far back her ancestors had been half-castes in St. Lucia; farther back still they had been slaves. It was the blood of these people that distracted her heart, that disturbed her infinitely; it was the soul of some other creature that was bound up in this alien body, and looked with a sometimes dismal curiosity out of her strange eyes.

She did not in the least understand her present life; it was, perhaps, too late for her to begin to understand it. She had never grasped this English life, and had always been surprised by it from the first moment she had arrived from St. Lucia and had begun her new existence, a gawky, brightly-dressed girl of fifteen, whom people stared at in the Maidstone streets when she went in to do shopping with her aunt. Nor did she realize this religion which had been taught her at fifteen; she could not see the need of it, else why had she been so happy all these years without it?

But she went to church always, and said her prayers, and did all she was told, examining religion the while with a thoughtful, half-savage innocence, to see what would happen.

It was getting late ; she withdrew herself from the window and began dressing.

Her aunt, with the idea of making her room feminine and pretty, had bought a number of small china figures—cherubs, devils riding on goats, the inartistic trivialities to be found at any shop ; these rested on Asta's mantelpiece, and above them hung an oleograph of Sassoferato's Madonna, that virgin whose pure face is framed in draperies of vivid red and white and blue.

Below that, again, was pinned a photograph ; it was a reproduction of a French picture, conceived in that particular spirit of art which embodies the physical rather than the spiritual aspect of life.

In a French salon, with gilt chairs and mirrors, a beautiful southern-looking woman, slim and dark, in wedding-dress and veil, had laid aside her white bridal flowers, and, having stolen away from the wedding-guests to this room, was standing clasped in her husband's arms.

This picture appealed to her and the Madonna did not. The Madonna's eyes were very deep and cold. Mrs. Case had put her on the wall, just as she had put the little china knick-knacks, because she was the right thing for a girl's room.

Meanwhile the girl got into her Sunday frock in this dingy room, papered with blue convolvulus, and went downstairs with the half-sad expression she always wore.

The Steele household possessed a cook, who was a very old servant of Mrs. Case's, and Mrs. Case

also conceived it to be her duty always to have a village girl in the house in course of training. The efforts of these damsels were not conducive to comfort. The dining-room was shabby; constant relays of girls in course of training had been bad for it. The garden also suffered from being in the hands of an unpractised youth whom Mr. Steele was training; the elder brother of the boy whom Asta Steele had so nearly drowned was the present gardener. A few straggling tobacco-plants, a fair display of geraniums and lupins, and a perfectly tropical growth of Virginia creeper were the result of his labours. The creeper, which should have been cut back, hung in festoons in the summer, and in the autumn enveloped the house in a crimson mantle. Then, later on, Charlie Luck had his work cut out in the shovelling away of the leaves.

Asta hated the time when the red leaves fell; the autumn chilled her, for she knew that winter was at hand, when she had no amusement at all. It was dull to sit with Judith all day, except when she was doing things about the village for papa; but Judith and she seemed to have more in common, and the woman thought with her. They used to go into Maidstone shopping together, and Asta had the confidence of a child in what she bought.

Judith's repartees to boys who spoke to them were approved by her, and when the faithful woman on one occasion addressed an over-charging cabman as 'low-down, dirty trash,' Asta did not regard the criticism as unbecoming; she had been used to such

expressions. The child would have felt at a loss without her. The woman always beat down, or tried to beat down, the prices in the local shops—not always with the happiest results, and always to the astonishment of the Maidstone tradesmen. ‘I give you so much,’ she would remark in the shops when they had stated their goods to be so much a pound or a yard.

Up the broad High Street, with its irregular buildings, its old-world, sleepy air, the two would go on market days, the negro woman generally wearing a black dress and coloured ribbons, and Asta rather stooping, and always in the last new dress that Judith had fashioned for her.

There was something pathetic in the couple; they were so innocent of the reason why they were stared at—they were so obviously aliens in this country town—they seemed to be hanging together for support. Over the bridge into the town, past the jam manufactory and the flour warehouses they would walk; Asta enjoyed the movement of the town, the sight of the market-carts and the pleasure-makers, and loved looking in the shop windows.

And Asta recognised, too, that papa was an object of remark. She looked on with a sulky understanding of the fact that the villagers made very little of her father, and it enraged her, for she loved him. It was a certain good nature and familiarity with them that made the villagers think little of him. Mr. Steele was not popular in the parish; they thought him fussy. He was generous, and would

have given the clothes off his back, yet the neighbouring clergy disliked him ; and, curiously enough, in spite of his kindness and generosity, the villagers took their cue from the gentry in their estimation of the Vicar, and, while accepting his gifts, decried him.

None of them could have said what it was about Mr. Steele for which they had such a contempt ; perhaps it was his glibness, the quickness and facility of speech that enwrapped so very little matter, the want of thought and an almost childish gaiety. Nothing could have been more truly Christian than his attitude of goodwill towards men ; but it was only necessary to see him with his colleagues to observe that all the Christian qualities were of no use in their eyes, weighed against his want of worldly wisdom and his unconventionality.

And then, he knew the wrong people. Here he was, according to his own lights, carrying out the tenets of a follower of Christ, his Master ; but the neighbouring clergy and their wives and daughters would not meet those whom Mr. Steele invited to break bread with him. They were anxious to be in the 'right set.' From their pulpits they gave with emphatic reverence quotations from the writings of the Apostles, but it would have been interesting to note their reception of the Apostles if they could have appeared amongst them.

This morning, when Mr. Steele joined his sister-in-law and daughter, he looked worn and tired, and Asta's tender eyes watched him with a pang. Following him almost immediately came the cook

and housemaid—the cook, a woman of about forty, prosperous-looking, stout, and homely; the housemaid, a sullen, anaemic, dark girl. They took their seats with that strained, conventional look that servants always use in their employers' presence, and Charlie Luck sat down beside them.

Mr. Steele began a prayer for households; he went through it with a rapt face: it gave the impression of a well-learned lesson. It was noticeable that in his t's and l's there was a break—a distinct click. His eyes, with their restless glance, roved over the whole assemblage—on Mrs. Case's angular figure bent in earnest prayer, on the rounded form of the cook in her lilac print, and on the sullen housemaid's thin, flat waist. He prayed for them all with the piety of a thorough Christian.

The green light creeping through the leaves of the Virginia creeper fell on his upturned features, and gave a ghastly look to his pale dark face; the collar of his clerical coat was shabby and showed no white. Before him were his clasped hands, with finger-nails showing a blue tint against the flesh. Then the prayer ended; he began another of his own making. In this he besought the Holy Ghost to come down amongst them, and, mean as they were, turn their darkness to light. His tone was that of an enthusiast, but there was no originality about the matter of his address, and it was couched in set, conventional phrases meaning little.

Asta had heard many of those prayers. There was a glibness about them—a facility which she

recognised and wondered at, never in want of a phrase ; the only interruption was the click that occurred in certain of his words.

Asta had, when first she heard them, been attentive to these supplications. But now she listened idly, with almost an innocent surprise. What result had these prayers of papa's, spoken so glibly and fluently ?

To this girl, till lately absolutely uninstructed in religion, but believing all that was now told her, it was inexplicable that nothing should happen after a prayer. Something too vague and intangible to be a doubt was in Asta's heart, but still she prayed on, for what papa said must be true. Mr. Steele's supplication was for the Holy Ghost to come down.

Asta bowed her beautiful dark face in prayer to that all-powerful Being whom she had been assured would help her ; but she prayed for something tangible, just as, in the old days at St. Lucia, she had asked a favour of her old aunts and had not been refused.

Asta's was a devout and curious prayer : she begged that she might some day be happy, and that she and papa might get away from this village and back to St. Lucia.

She also prayed, ' Make me very handsome, like the woman in the French picture, so that I may be loved some day.'

So lost was she in this entreaty that the servants had pulled themselves with a scuffle to their feet, and were leaving the room before she awoke.

CHAPTER V

MR. STEELE at once began eating his bread-and-milk, and Mrs. Case poured out the tea. Mr. Steele ate restlessly, looking about the while with a pathetic expression. The past day was before him, with its fatigues, his efforts to please the villagers, the annoyances of the day, winding up with the failure of the magic-lantern.

From time to time Mrs. Case spoke cheerfully, but she was unable to do much to dissipate the quiet of the room.

'Were you speaking to the Williamses?' Mr. Steele asked presently of his daughter.

'Yes.'

'And did they say why they didn't come to our last tennis-party after accepting?'

'No, papa, they said nothing.'

'Well, then, it's very rude of them.'

'Yes, papa, they are always rude.'

She said it very sadly, and without any asperity. She was perfectly used to the attitude of people towards the family, and now took it much as a matter of course.

'What's that you say? Always rude? Why, what have they done before?'

Mr. Steele always forgot the past, and was always surprised to hear of it.

'I don't know.' Asta looked uncomfortably at her plate.

'They have very little manners; I don't think it is anything but that,' observed Mrs. Case, with cheerfulness. 'I thought they looked very supercilious and horrid in those red hats. How their mother can allow them! I'm sure no young man—'

'Their ugliness is not to the point,' interrupted Mr. Steele. 'We are as God created us. The point is, what have they got to be supercilious about?'

'I don't know, I'm sure,' said Mrs. Case, still comfortably and cheerfully. Why should Robert fret about these stupid people?

'The word "supercilious" surely implies superiority,' continued the Vicar, with his clip in his words, and a difficulty with the 'r' in superiority. 'You tell me that they think themselves superior, and yet offer no clue to the reason.' He gave a slight, nervous laugh, and helped himself restlessly to the marmalade.

A puzzled look drifted over the girl's face.

'I do think that, being Christians, they ought to be different; for if they are nasty and cruel now it will be bad for them in eternity; and I think the village people who are so thankless to papa are very wicked and also very foolish, for they and the Williamses both will suffer.'

'Now, Asta, that is enough,' cried Mrs. Case, who was always surprised and shocked by her niece's literal application and acceptation of her religious

training, and her broad, childlike treatment of Bible stories. ‘This parish is no different from others.—Your band shows a gap. Come here, child! What? No, Judith can’t do it. Judith’s way would be to pin on a bow to hide it, and stick another in your hair; I know her messy style. That’s not the *English* way.’

As Mrs. Case manipulated the dress, Asta looked a poor, shabby thing, like some unhappy tropical bird caged in a Northern home, with its plumage frayed and faded. As her bodice was put straight by her aunt’s impatient, deft fingers, her beautiful, glimmering dark eyes stared in turn at the ugly rep wall-paper, at the worn furniture, and at the breakfast table.

But she was far away. Hell was a literal fact for her, and she was trying to imagine what it would be like, and why the Williams girls, who no doubt had been told about it by their father, just as she had been, and had thus enjoyed the same advantages as herself in hearing of it, were not kinder to everyone.

And then she thought of St. Lucia.

Ah! if only she could get back to St. Lucia, where it seemed always warm, where she had been always happy! She saw again the little bungalow by the dusty high-road, with Paradise flowers and heliotrope on its walls. She remembered how the fuzzy yellow balls on the mimosa-trees that grew along the terrace overlooking the road got dusty on one side of their fluffy blossoms with the white dust of the thoroughfare, and how the Paradise flowers turned faintly

purple when they languished in the burning sun of noon. But nothing seemed to decay there. The roses and verbenas died, but in the scented haze new blooms were born, and born so easily and rapidly that one did not see that the other blossoms had perished. A hill rose at the back of the house, and there she was in the habit of playing. A little Creole girl, whose father had something to do with the prison, used to come over with a black nurse, and the children made a house in a tiny barrow they had hollowed, sweeping its floor clean with leaves, and making it gay with garlands of the four-o'clock flowers.

Then, when she was older, she had lived the same lazy, charming life; nothing seemed difficult, cruel, or cold. The insects even—‘bichus,’ as Aunt Julia called them—had a bright look; they, too, seemed part of a life that was easy, happy, and brilliant.

Very few people came to the house, but all seemed fond of her and of the two good-natured aunts. Sitting or lounging in the heliotrope-scented balcony overlooking the road to the barracks, there was always movement. They could see the soldiers of the West India Regiment, with their uniforms as gay as parrots, or the soberly-dressed English officers, tired-looking and brown with the heat, but with a pallor through their bronze.

The men journeyed up and down from year's end to year's end. They toiled up, carrying melons or vegetables, or descended the hill, looking very

sprightly and gay, to go love-making in the dirty, bright town below.

Asta thought of them all as very brave and very wonderful. The dusky faces of the black soldiers and the bronzed visages of the Englishmen were alike handsome to the girl. She had been brought up by Aunt Julia and Aunt Melanie to think them heroes, and when they marched past in a body all three would run out to the terrace to see them pass.

'There is the Colonel! What a brave-looking figure he is! Don't lean so far, Asta! they will see you,' Aunt Julia would say with a giggle.

But Aunt Melanie openly worshipped the military. In a loose alpaca bodice over her stayless figure, she would lean well over the terrace-rail and gaze with obvious admiration on the soldiery.

What happy, happy days! Since then both Aunt Julia and Aunt Melanie had died, and the only link with that flower-scented, dear past was Judith.

CHAPTER VI

THERE was a garden-party at Stafford Croyton, the nearest house to the Vicarage, and at four o'clock that day the road leading in from Maidstone and the various byways converging from the adjacent villages had been full of vehicles belonging to the neighbouring clergy and gentry: odd-looking, old-world sociables—useful in the country, where long drives must be taken at night in rain and snow—ramshackle waggonettes for the convenience of large families, smart dog-carts with young women sitting up driving, very neatly dressed and alert-looking, and one or two broughams in which elderly people were seated.

The Steeles saw Mrs. Paton's pony-carriage drive round to wait for her.

'The usual hour's wait while she dresses,' observed Mrs. Case; 'and what is her dress when all's said and done?'

The family, possessing no conveyance of any kind, on these occasions always walked. The Vicar had bicycled at one time, but a severe accident had shattered his confidence both in himself as a rider, and in his machine, and he rode no more. Bicycling was practically useless to Asta, for she never went

beyond the village alone, but always in the company of her father or Mrs. Case, or of Judith ; she had no girl friends to go and visit or to make bicycling parties with.

Asta, though she disliked them, accepted without complaint those long, dull walks over the Kentish roads ; she took it as part of the English life. Mrs. Case, moreover, had a half-disapproval of anything that made life easier ; she entertained a conventional belief that a certain amount of annoyance and discomfort should not only be endured but sought by all, and that what she spoke of as 'crosses' were beneficial. Long walks in dust and heat were distinctly unpleasant, but though Mrs. Case was by no means a strong woman or a good walker, she would uncomplainingly trudge six or seven miles to a tennis party, and the same distance back.

That no one should shirk the disagreeables of life was a religion with her, but she especially held to the good old-fashioned idea that women and children in particular should find life pretty nasty ; and it was always an underlying annoyance to her that existence was only negatively unpleasant for Asta.

Asta was young. Life should be excessively objectionable for the young ; it was excellent discipline for them, and formed a phase of existence on which they could look back in after years with a comfortable feeling of disgust.

Mrs. Case had been brought up herself on this principle. She had, as a girl, taken cold baths in cold weather in cold rooms, and had practised on

the piano for two hours with chilblained hands before breakfast. Breaking the ice in a bath she looked on, in fact, almost as a religious practice. As in the case of a great many women of her type, it was neither love for her fellow-creatures nor any real feeling of religion which kept Mrs. Case endlessly at work, but a restless, unprofitable activity which she, in turn, tried to stimulate in what she called ‘the Young.’

The particular specimen of youth whom she had most to do with now, unfortunately, however, showed no aptitude for assimilating the teaching of self-abnegation and fuss, nor did she perform with any distinction such tasks as fell to her share. Lost in a vague wonder at her present life, she understood it no more than would a Savage who had been put down in this quiet village.

To-day she looked wistfully at the distant pony-carriage, and said :

‘ It must be nice to drive sometimes.’

‘ It is much better for the health to walk,’ replied her aunt briskly. ‘ We were given our legs and should use them. Look at me! I’ve never driven when I could walk; all this bicycling, too, is mere laziness.’

Asta, as invited, cast a dreamy eye over her aunt’s exterior, but the glance did not appear to reassure her as to the value of exercise. They were awaiting the Vicar in front, by the bed of capers, and, Mr. Steele now appearing, the three set forth over the powdered chalk of the roads on their way to Stafford Croyton.

The Vicar had turned up his clerical trousers to preserve them from the white dust, and showed scarlet socks above his dusty Oxford shoes. Asta, in a white dress and a straw hat full of red flowers, walked along beside him, quite happy to be with him, and talking to him in undertones which her aunt could not catch.

When they entered the gates of Stafford Croyton, the Misses Williams and their father had just arrived and were alighting from a basket-carriage, and the two sisters were shaking the Kentish dust out of their pink dresses. They were fair girls, and having discovered by the simple device of sending locks of their hair to the editress of a lady's paper that they could wear pink and blue with success, now generally appeared in frocks of these colours. Their countrified, pink dresses of a crude tint were dazzling in the sun. The elder girl looked happier than her sister, for she took an interest in the parish, whereas the younger, having no vocation for Church work and no interest in life, was beginning to feel the crushing monotony of the life of a poor parson's daughter in the country. The younger girl had a flat waist and a pale, anaemic complexion, with dark marks under the eyes indicative of headaches, and she now moved her red straw hat restlessly on her brow, as if she were suffering from one at that moment.

Suddenly she nudged her sister.

'Bother! here are the Steeles!' she whispered to the elder girl. 'Don't look round, but let us walk

straight in and papa will have to follow us. Come!' and they moved away together.

But Mr. Williams, with the denseness of a perfectly honest person incapable of intrigue, had not heard the whisper, and had already commenced a conversation with Mr. Steele. Personally he did not care very much about him, considering him fussy and eccentric; but, on the other hand, he did not dislike him, and moreover he would never have openly slighted anyone. He began deplored the dust and heat, and finally asked his colleague whether he was going to the clerical meeting which was to be held at Bearsted, an adjoining parish. The Vicar of Borth answering with his usual enthusiasm, the two men were presently in an animated conversation, Mrs. Case and Asta walking behind.

'How tiresome of papa!' murmured the younger Miss Williams. 'Now we shall have to go in with the Steeles, and no one thinks anything of them, and people will think— Oh, my head, how it aches! I wonder if he will be there. Do I look very pale? I feel grey, and—oh!—half-sick.'

The elder girl studied her sister's countenance. It was the face of an invalid. Even youth seemed to have left it at the sight of Asta. It looked sickly, like the face of some poor girl out for the first time after illness; but she tried to cheer her by saying that everyone appeared washed out in the heat. Presently they felt obliged to turn round and take some notice of Miss Steele and her aunt.

The younger girl looked into Asta's vivid eyes and

hated them. She hated to think of John Safford looking into those eyes, and she feared them unutterably.

They were not really pretty, soft eyes like her own, she told herself, but like those of some animal, quite black underneath, like no eyes she had ever seen before. She shrank into herself; her head throbbed. What a guy Asta looked in that sunburnt straw hat trimmed with poppies! But the girl no longer felt a pride in her own dress and looks; she felt faded, gone out, and there only remained heartache and the throbbing of her head. John Safford would be there, undoubtedly, and would talk to and look at Asta Steele; he always did, most men did, and why did they? Surely it was a niggerish face to admire, a wicked face, too, with a horrid, sulky expression, a brown skin, but, though she would not have owned it, the poppies in Asta's hat made her look beautiful to-day.

Amy Williams stared at her in silence, and then turned aside.

Then Mrs. Case, alert and cheerful, led the way to where Mrs. Dalmer stood. She was a short, heavily-built woman of about thirty-six, with hair dyed a deep Titian red, and she wore a white dress showing her full figure and large hips; the deep auburn tint of her hair, which would have had, if natural, a fair, clear skin with it, made her complexion look unnaturally dark, and gave a bluish shade to her pencilled brows. Her jaws were square and her nose *retroussé*; her hair was brushed

up over her forehead, and fastened in a huge knot low on the neck behind; her eyes were heavy and deep-set and of a cold shade, between hazel and grey. Her hair next the skin showed its true colour of brown, and the little loose hairs on her neck which had escaped the dye were a dark brown.

She had seen Asta Steele for the last two years about the village, at church, and at such gatherings as the present, and had never noticed her very much. To-day, perhaps, she was less execrably dressed; perhaps the wreath of scarlet poppies in the hat drew attention to the dusky skin and dazzling, warm eyes; but after Mrs. Dalmer had shaken hands with her she looked at her attentively, and as a woman of a certain type looks at another woman, not to see whether she is beautiful from an artistic standpoint, but to judge of what effect she would have on men. Mrs. Dalmer noticed a certain bizarre air about Asta—noted for the first time the sucked-in underlip, the dark, crisped hair growing low on the forehead like the hair of the Clytie, the cloudy, beautiful eyes; then she dropped the girl's hand and turned away coldly, and began speaking rapidly to a man at her side.

'These functions are really rather boring; one has to invite everyone—people in whom one hasn't the slightest interest.'

The young man nodded in assent, but looked twice at Asta Steele's eyes before he turned to reply to his hostess. He was a pleasant-looking, red-

faced, red-necked youngster, dressed in a grey summer suit, with a white cummerbund.

'It is the odd little girl Skene and I met at the magic-lantern performance,' said he.

'Ah, yes; while I was away, wasn't it? And I hope you admired her?'

'Skene did,' replied the young fellow, but without replying to the question.

'I am glad to think that someone does,' returned the lady. 'She and her people are a fearful family. As I tell you, we invite everyone here from the highways and byways. Her father, our Vicar, is one of the most deplorable of people—a half-caste or something, and, moreover, such a dreadful person to have anything to do with in the parish that my husband has quite lost interest in the place.'

'What does he do?'

'It isn't so much what he does as what he is. Look for yourself—that awful being over there!'

Mr. Burton glanced in the direction indicated. Mr. Steele and his sister-in-law and Asta were standing together, and now, when, in the distance, he could not see the girl's eyes, she looked merely a queerly-dressed, strange-looking object. The Misses Williams had, in a brisk aside, given their father to understand that they wished to be away from the Steele family, and, under the pretext of tennis, they had walked off, leaving them alone.

The appearance of the Vicar of Borth at this moment was not, in truth, prepossessing. His face looked hot and sallow. His black, clerical coat,

devoid of white, gave him a dingy aspect ; but there was a certain dignity about the figure of this poor parson—that absolute losing of self which is always found in people in whom there is an admixture, however slight, of dark blood. In no position could Mr. Steele have felt awkward, and in no position could he have carried himself otherwise than with that rather pathetic dignity which always seemed so grotesque to his parishioners and amused them so much. At peace with all men, he felt there was no reason why they should not entertain a like attitude towards himself. Small disputes about Church and parochial matters—what were they, after all ?—Surely nothing to base a dislike on. The Vicar saw no reason for his and his family's unpopularity, though he felt it as a dim, unpleasant, and unaccountable fact.

This afternoon he did not realize the small country intrigues that were going on round him ; he did not know that he was among enemies rather than friends. He only dimly felt, as Asta did, that the world was against him, and this in spite of his doing his best.

Grasping his daughter's slim arm, and with his clerical coat flying loose and a black sailor hat on his dark head, he wandered about with her among the people, admiring the flowers. About a hundred guests had already assembled, the neighbouring squires and clergy and their families, a few young men and a great many girls. Most of the latter had the lean, over-trained look which the sporting

country girl has assumed since bicycling came into vogue—hard-featured, brown-faced, with flat chests, scarcely defined under the looseness of their cotton blouses. Far away, all over the world, business or their professions had taken their brothers, leaving these girls behind to the monotony of a muslin existence, lightened only by such country gatherings as this. They walked about the grounds in twos or threes, and tried to appear to be enjoying themselves, but over all reigned that chastened dulness to which they were so well used.

The grounds were laid out in terrace below terrace of lawn, smooth as Utrecht velvet, and adorned with very intricate designs of carpet gardening. The visitors sauntered about admiring the arrangements of colour. All exclaimed at the beauty of the flowers. A stout brewer explained to his wife the new method employed in draining these terraces. In the conventional platitudes of people meeting each other seldom, their conversation was confined to the weather, the dust, the last flower-show, and such generalities as are safe in country towns where the people are intermarried.

Asta yawned; she did not admire the carpet gardening. It was astonishing to her to hear that it was admirable. A bed of round, fat plants, resembling artichokes, filled in with a crimson-leaved plant, particularly annoyed her.

‘How can the people call that pretty?’ asked she.

‘Hush!’ said Mrs. Paton’s voice at her elbow. ‘You ought to be pleased with it, Asta.—No, dear,

I won't shake hands ; cotton gloves are cool to the wearer, but always put my teeth on edge.—It means money, and that is why we all admire it. Each one of those fat green-grey plants has been put in by a man with a measure and tape ; every root of that plant like pickled cabbage has been laboriously forced. All that means cost, and proves, moreover, as it is a luxury, that the person owning it has cash to spare ; that is why it is admirable.'

Asta listened to this speech with the puzzled air with which most things were received by her. Mrs. Paton was an astonishing person, not in the least like Aunt Melanie or Aunt Julia ; the dear aunts never indulged in cynicism, nor expressed themselves in epigram or paradox, but accepted the world very gratefully, just as they found it. Asta's dark eyes scanned Mrs. Paton's blonde face, and then she said :—

'All the flowers are in prison, that's why I don't think it pretty ; and they have all been dwarfed and made wretched so as to fit into their places in these beds.'

'Let's hope the begonias don't feel their position as acutely as you think,' replied Mrs. Paton.

'Mrs. Dalmer is not a very good hostess,' observed the Vicar, whose dark, restless eyes had been travelling over the assemblage. 'Why doesn't she introduce people more ? and why doesn't she get up some sets of tennis ? Asta would like a game. Why can't people be more *hearty* ? There's young Terrence, Asta ; we do know him. Let's ask him to get a

lady and make a set ; we're wasting this fine afternoon.'

'Oh, do not, papa !' cried Asta quickly. 'He knows us perfectly well, and could ask us if he chose.'

'But it is for me to ask *him*,' said Mr. Steele with a pathetic dignity. 'He would not venture, and, moreover, he is probably diffident of asking a young lady. It is shyness on his part, and we should help him by taking the initiative.'

'Oh, papa, you think so well of everyone ; but it's not shyness on people's part, it's nastiness.'

'What ?'

'It isn't shyness,' repeated Asta, with a shame-faced glance at Mrs. Paton, 'it is unkind nastiness ; and he is always talking about his "set."'

'I think Asta is right,' murmured Mrs. Paton. 'If these young brewers and solicitors would only devote the same time and ingenuity to their beer and law as they do to their social ambitions, they would establish a real instead of a fancied position, and we should all love them more.'

'I should not love him,' responded the girl. 'Do you call him a Christian, papa ?'

'I hope so, my child,' answered the sanguine Vicar, wiping his brow under the black straw hat with a blue handkerchief, and replacing it in the crown of the hat, from whence a corner hung down ; — 'I hope so, dear, but I don't know.'

'I do not think so. I saw him shake a cat off a tree for his terrier.'

'That is conclusive,' observed Mrs. Paton.

'So that if he is a Christian, and does get to Heaven, I don't want to meet him there,' continued Asta.

'I think you need not be afraid of seeing much of him,' murmured Mrs. Paton. 'Even in Heaven he will be occupied in discovering which of the seraphim are in the smartest and best set, so as to join them.'

Just then the Vicar turned round and said :—

'How d'ye do, Safford?'

A slight man in clerical dress had been standing talking to a group of people, from whom he had been trying to escape ever since the Steeles had appeared. His face brightened perceptibly as he looked at Asta.

Standing a little apart with their father were the Misses Williams; they had escaped to the tennis ground so as not to be seen talking to the 'poor Steeles,' and here was the girl again, to their annoyance, grave as always, solemn-looking, with nothing pleasant or bright about her, and with those burning, beautiful eyes shaded by the poppy-red hat.

There was an air of weariness of life about her. She did not enjoy this gathering, nor, for that matter, did the others, but while they conducted themselves from a conventional standpoint, Asta's attitude was the profoundly natural one of an innocent Savage, ignorant of the shams of life, and not knowing why she had been brought here, not understanding even that she should affect a polite enjoyment.

'Miss Asta, you will make up a four?' suggested the Curate; and Miss Steele assented.

Mr. Steele was delighted, and Safford looked about him for another couple.

John Safford was one of those ingenuous people who believe the world and things in general to be what they would wish them to be rather than what they are. He did not realize that it would be difficult to get up a game for Asta, and had only, he considered, to determine which of the people to ask.

'Let's see,' he observed cheerily, peering through the glare.

He had tilted his soft, clerical hat over his eyes, and his rather long, bare neck seemed to form a line with his back. His face was not unpleasant; it was the type of face which is found in many a country village—good, self-reliant, uninteresting, having no very wide interests, no very wide knowledge of life. The long, rather determined, shaven upper lip gave an ascetic look to his face; his lip and chin were blue where he had shaved, and his black hair was beginning to turn grey. His Church and the dogmas of his Church were everything to him; he never listened to anything that was not either about the Church or Archæology. Scandal of any kind was never assimilated by him, so that he was in happy ignorance of the fact that people might avoid the Steeles socially, and he now applied himself in light-hearted fashion to get up a set.

'Whom shall we have?' he asked, turning from his survey of the groups to look at Asta Steele.

The girl shrugged her shoulders :—

‘ Goodness knows,’ she replied.

‘ There is young Terrence,’ again suggested the Vicar, who had quite forgotten his daughter’s objections, and who always discounted her views of people’s conduct towards them. ‘ Asta knows him.’

Asta shrugged her shoulders, but she did not attempt to interfere again. She watched the curate inviting the young man to play, and with listless eyes saw him return.

‘ He cannot play ; he is waiting for a set,’ Mr. Safford announced.

The Vicar’s eyes again roved hungrily over the grounds, anxiously fixing on various young men as possible players. Neither he nor Mr. Safford guessed that the youth had been lying, the one because of a certain mental obtuseness that prevented his seeing slights, and the other because he was absolutely unsuspicuous.

The Williamses close by observed the looks the curate cast about in his anxiety. Amy Williams noted with anguish his expression as he spoke to Asta. There was something tragic in the face of this pale girl as she watched the couple. The countrified air, the frumpish smartness of the pink dress, seemed to get behind the anguish, and were lost. It was more hateful to see Asta indifferent to him, scarcely looking at him, than if she had been kind. How did she get this power over the man ? For it was evident to even Amy Williams’s jealous

mind that she had not striven for it, and cared nothing for the possession of it.

The group was now joined by three people. Mrs. Dalmer and two gentlemen were walking round the gardens, and stood for a moment beside the Vicar and his daughter.

Asta saw that one of the gentlemen was the man who had talked to her at the magic-lantern entertainment. For his part he was not indifferent. He remembered very well the girl with the eyes. He had even looked about the grounds for her that afternoon.

She appeared distinctly more beautiful than on that first evening. But was it beauty? Her lips were a shade too full, her skin was not so very good. No matter; this style of looks was what gave him pleasure. And Asta looked gravely back at him when he spoke to her, and put a cotton-covered little hand in his. No man, however vain, could see pleasure at meeting him in those dark eyes. Passion there was, latent, but she now gazed at Colonel Skene with precisely the same regard as at her father or Mr. Safford.

In a life well stocked with episodes of sentiment and of passion Colonel Skene could not remember a pretty young woman looking at him with such an indifferent expression. Moreover, she seemed to have nothing to say for herself. She did not address him, but remained standing beside him with that air of sulkiness, of something latent, constrained—that indefinable air which had struck on his senses when he first saw her.

'We are trying to get up a set, Colonel,' said Mr. Safford, addressing him; 'but people seem to find it too warm to play.'

Mr. Safford, as he spoke, did not look encouraging; his hair hung limply from his exertions.

'I should not find it too warm,' suggested Colonel Skene, looking straight at the girl's dark eyes, as if he were addressing them. 'May I play?'

'Oh yes,' replied Asta; 'but then we shall want a lady.'

'I will ask one of the Miss Williamses,' said Mr. Safford.

'I know they won't,' replied Asta.

No, the Misses Williams both felt too tired to play, and Mr. Safford, wiping his forehead, but still without a suspicion of the reason of their sudden lassitude, came back through the sun to tell them so.

A dark expression came over Asta's face; she looked at her father furtively. But he had not felt this further slight—did not recognise it as one, and the poor child was glad. She straightened the poppy-hat and looked at the Misses Williams. They were very ugly and horrid girls, and hated her, she felt sure. And why did they? What had she done? And then she caught Colonel Skene's eyes fixed on her face.

He was exactly like the white officers she had seen from the balcony at St. Lucia, she was thinking; none of the men about here had just this look. He was, she thought, much like the man in the picture

in her room—that picture that seemed to her the very sacrament of love.

Meanwhile he was comparing her to a girl he had seen at Port Said—one of the many creatures of mixed blood who make the place fascinating, picturesque. She had had orange twisted in her hair, large rings in her ears, a ravishing face—

How did this curious father and daughter find themselves in this humdrum Kentish village?

Mr. Safford was one of those people who become pale with heat. He had played ever since he arrived, and now, tucking his handkerchief into his belt, he gave up the attempt to arrange another game for Miss Steele. Tea had arrived. A couple of footmen had laid a table under some trees, and towards this everyone was flocking, with that hungry air that is really only an attempt, where all is boredom, to appear interested in something.

‘Shall we go tea-wards?’ Mr. Safford asked Asta in his precise way.

And then Asta heard Colonel Skene’s voice saying: ‘Yes, let us go.’

Her father put his arm within the curate’s, and together they sauntered off. Did Safford think he could manage with one van for his boys’ Band of Hope? asked the Vicar.

‘Good gracious! why, you’ve only just given them a treat!’ returned the other. ‘You spoil them, man.’

Then, tilting his hat over his eyes, he looked through the glare to where Miss Steele stood beside the Colonel.

He wished she would come and let him give her some tea and talk to her. But she was not looking at him ; she was standing with her usual intense and rather sad expression. She did not seem to mind the sun, which was fading the other women, and had made Colonel Skene put forward his Monte Carlo hat over his red forehead, and wrinkle up his bright blue eyes to look at her. Then the Vicar again began talking of parochial matters, and Mr. Safford was forced again to give him attention.

It was a curious twist in Asta's fate that Colonel Skene should have seen her just at this time, and that he should never before have seen a woman who so attracted him. Thirty-eight years of life had left him with emotions that could only be touched by the unusual. Asta was unusual ; her *brusquerie* absolutely charmed him ; the mixture of innocence and passion in her shadowy eyes was delightful to look on. In common with many men of his type, domesticity revolted him, and the sight of young ladies with bodices cut just the right height, prepared to marry eligible men, and dispense small-talk and tea to their friends, and in time get into the inevitable tea-gown, was unbearable to him.

No man could think of Asta married ; that exquisite, full upper lip with the down on it would surely never discuss housekeeping, and the disposal of yesterday's mutton.

Standing beside her, he searched her eyes, wondering passionately what she was thinking of—what she was like.

No matter, she was devilish handsome, anyhow. These half-darkie women had the very devil in them.

Curiously enough for a man of so many adventures, the pale face with the fervid eyes belonging to this shabby young person had drifted across his mental vision once or twice since the day he had first met her. Once or twice in the early mornings he had remembered her, and seen the sucked-in underlip, the dusky hair on the retreating forehead, the exquisite eyes, set like jewels under the dark brows.

She stood beside him now without addressing him, and the fact interested Colonel Skene far more than if she had been talking to him with the engaging smile of the ordinary young lady.

He had secured a couple of plates of strawberries-and-cream, and, with his hat casting a shadow over the red-brown of his face, he looked about for seats.

'We cannot eat in this hot sun,' said he. 'Let us find some nice, cool spot. I'll carry both plates. Do come; I know a nice tree with a seat under it.'

'But how about papa?' asked Asta.

Colonel Skene looked attentively and with some awe from under the brim of his hat. What a delicious experience for a *blasé* man of the world to find a girl anxious for papa's company! and how curious this speech with the click in it! In Mr. Steele's talk it was a blemish, but in this girl's mouth it sounded, he thought, like a crease in a word which she was

trying to stroke out with her tongue. The Colonel looked more interested than ever.

'Your father is busy talking,' he replied. 'I heard him deep in parochial matters.'

He paused before an umbrella-tree, and, setting down the two plates, lifted aside its branches for Asta to enter.

Inside, the flat overlap of leaves made an emerald screen against the world; the place seemed to hold a subdued green twilight. It was a vault of pale shades of green, showing darker curved and triangular patches where the leaves were double.

CHAPTER VII

IN the subdued light of this green cave of leaves Asta's face appeared a pale-tinted, soft-coloured mask, with darker tints indicating the tender curves of the full lips, and soft, cloudy, curved outlines where the eyelashes rested over the brilliance of her eyes. Her figure, slim and like a boy's in its white dress, seemed to Colonel Skene to have the spareness of a virgin in an old Missal ; just so the white folds fell from the form, indicating no curve. Below the skirt appeared her small, finely-made ankles, and Colonel Skene thought again of Solomon's Song.

Why was it that this love-song should always recur to him at the looks and words of this girl ? And then he reflected that it was that something unknown, hidden, which his senses had always perceived in Asta, that expression of latent barbarism and passion which he had recognised in her, that recalled it.

The dancing-girl at Port Said had given him this exquisite aroma of dead and bygone loves ; past centuries had peered out of her close-lidded eyes ; curious histories were written on her face. There, too, as he saw her sinuous form swaying, her delicately-turned limbs gliding through the allurements of a dance, half-madness and half-posture, he

had thought of the Song of Solomon. The Arabs who crouched at her feet, beating savage music and uttering cries, might, hundreds of years ago, have beaten just such music and uttered such cries to the gliding limbs of dancing women. In the house at Port Said the atmosphere and background had been in keeping with her, but to be presented with these allurements in the form of this little shabby parson's daughter, sitting here beside him in an English village, was far more piquant.

Then, with an abrupt change of thought, he reflected how beautiful she would be well-dressed and in luxurious surroundings. Paris he could picture her in. In Paris a woman with these looks might easily become the fashion. Parisians liked the bizarre. Dresses from Worth with touches of orange and scarlet, the scent of hothouse flowers or of the last essence from Japan, a clasp of rubies and diamonds on the pale-brown throat—he pictured her lying back in a victoria with that air of infinite langour, of caring for nothing, and, underlying all, that suggestion of the unknown.

‘Why is it,’ he asked the girl, ‘that everyone in life is trying to be with someone whom he either oughtn’t to be with, or who doesn’t want to be with him? I have carried you off here, but probably you would rather be elsewhere.’

‘Oh no, I shouldn’t.’

‘You wouldn’t?’

‘No, I simply *loathe* the others.’

'I am glad you don't, at all events, loathe me,' he rejoined.

'Why should I?' asked the girl gravely. 'I don't know you well enough. Besides—'

There was a little pause, during which Colonel Skene was sensible that the eyes of this delightful young Savage were regarding him critically, and he rapidly put on his best expression.

'Besides?'—he repeated after her.

But whatever thought was flitting through the girl's mind could evidently not be expressed in words.

'You very often leave your sentences unfinished, Miss Steele,' said he. 'It is very suggestive, and reminds one of the romances of Anthony Hope.'

'I don't know his books,' rejoined the girl. 'My aunt doesn't like me to read novels, so we belong to no library, and I only get cheap old ones that Judith smuggles in for me.'

'Who is Judith?' asked the Colonel with cheerful interest.

'My old nurse who came with me from St. Lucia. She went down to the railway stall at Maidstone only last week and bought in for me a lot of books—splendid ones. I read them up in the wood when I'm not busy curating for papa; but wasn't it good of Judith!'

'It was. She reminds me of the nurse in "Romeo and Juliet."'

'Where?'

'In "Romeo and Juliet."'

'Everything seems to remind you of something

else,' observed the girl, gravely regarding him. 'And you remind me of something, too. You are just like the white officers of the West India regiments I used to see in St. Lucia, and when you move your arm—do it now—there—it is exactly like the heliotrope that grew on our house there, and I think I am back once more in St. Lucia. Do you get it out of a bottle?'

'I get it out of a bottle, as you suggest,' replied Colonel Skene; 'very much out of a bottle. But it is a triumph for Rimmel that you should mistake it for the flower scent.'

'When I smell heliotrope I think I am back in St. Lucia.'

'I am so glad you are not,' interposed Colonel Skene, looking into her eyes.

'And then, I wonder what became of poor Argot, my aunts' parrot, when they died, and whether Teresa is still in St. Lucia. Perhaps she is married. She was such a nice child. We used to play together.'

'Nice children do marry very rapidly,' observed the Colonel. 'The parrot, too, is very likely married by this time and provided for.'

Sitting under the screen of leaves, he half-closed his eyes and fell again to examining the girl's features. In his eyes they were quite flawless, or, rather, the undoubted faults of her face and form were those he liked—exquisite imperfections which he had remembered and now saw again with happiness as recovered pleasures to his eyes.

He had never been so taken with any face before, and her half-fierce, wholly untrained manner charmed him. Her little trick of leaving some of her sentences unfinished and her sad air reminded him rather of the girl he had been so near loving at Simla. Loving? worse still, of marrying. It had been a very near thing. He had been wild, insane enough to wish to marry her, but he now knew how wise he had been not to. Marriage was a hideous blunder, a barbarous institution; it would have been wretched for the girl, wretched for him. He was perfectly happy now, whereas, as a married man—bah! the idea was horrible.

But the greatest of this girl's charms was that no such idea could enter a man's head in regarding her. Miss Steele behind a coffee-urn! Miss Steele going with a card-case to leave two of her husband's cards just at the right and discreet interval on her friends, ordering a dinner, inquiring the character of a cook!

'Where do you sit in church?' he inquired, struck by a sudden thought.

'In the back seat just by the door.'

'Do you wonder why I ask?'

No, Asta didn't wonder, and said so. And then she added in her sweet, broken voice:

'If I didn't sit there, half the boys would get out during service.'

'I asked,' said Colonel Skene softly, 'so that I should be able to look at you in church to-morrow. Do you mind?'

'No, not at all ; why should I ?'

'No reason at all why you should object to giving me pleasure. It will be pleasure.'

'Will it ?' asked Asta. 'I don't think that anything that could happen in church could give pleasure. I don't understand what we go there for.'

Colonel Skene sat up in his leafy bower, and looked again at this dark-eyed parson's daughter.

'Don't understand what we go there for, and your father what he is ! Why, my dear young——' What was she—what was the best termination to this sentence ? Dear young lady ?—dear young friend ? No, Asta couldn't be described as a young friend. Young friends hadn't eyes like hers ; young friends didn't give one just this sensation. Dear young—what the *devil* was she ? Good heavens ! what a strange girl ! And then he said, 'We go there to say our prayers, to ask forgiveness for our sins—if we have any,' he added thoughtfully—'and of course to listen to the excellent sermon which, no doubt, your father has prepared for us next Sunday.'

'Yes, he has ; it's done. It's called, "Thou art the man !" The only part I like is papa's sermon. But what I mean is that I've prayed for so many things and not got one of them.'

'Perhaps you will get them later on,' murmured the hopeful Colonel, looking into her eyes. 'The world is always good to pretty women.'

'I do not think I shall ever get them. I have

begged to leave this place, and it seems to me that I shall never get away.'

'Why do you want to get away?'

'I hate the place; I don't understand it. It is cold and dull in winter. The church is cold and dark and smells of plaster. Nothing that I ask for is given me, and no one loves me but papa—and Judith. Auntie doesn't really love me; everything I do is wrong. She doesn't like my being so dark and my hair frizzling as it does. She would like me to be different; and she doesn't like Judith. Some day, she says, she will send Judith away, and then I shall have no one but papa. Luckily, Judith doesn't want to leave me, and Judith doesn't mind the life here as I do; she goes about and sees people, and she goes to all papa's village dances. She is probably here to-day.'

Colonel Skene gazed round the emerald-green walls of the umbrella-tree, and then, putting aside a bough, looked carefully out, but no one whom he could imagine to be Judith was in sight.

In the distance were the tennis-grounds, dotted over with men in white and girls in faint colours, and, away against a background of green, a bank of matrons, with one or two men moving about on the outskirts. Faint cries, which he could imagine as the conventional exclamations of 'Well played!' and 'Hard luck!' were wafted towards him; overhead some rooks flew, cawing, against the blue of the sky.

The verdant screen disturbed by his hand let in a

sunbeam, which flickered on the warm pallor of his companion's cheek.

'Is she really here?' he asked. 'In what capacity?'

Asta shrugged her shoulders.

'Nothing in particular. If she hears of a dance or party, she simply goes to it, that's all.'

'She simply goes to it!' murmured Colonel Skene. 'She is evidently a very natural person. Do you like dances, Miss Steele?'

'I've only been to one—yes, I liked it; but the people gave a dance the year after, and didn't ask us again. Judith went.'

'I think your nurse must be a most delightful person.'

'She goes and offers to help the servants, and then she sees the dresses and enjoys herself.'

Asta gave a little sigh—a sigh soft as her broken speech, and prepared to get up from her seat; they would be wanting her to go home, perhaps. Yes, they would say good-bye to the hostess, and she and the Vicar and Mrs. Case would walk back over the powdered, white Kentish roads to the Vicarage; but she had been very happy here—she had never been so happy before.

The tremulous sigh, the little action of departure, roused Colonel Skene. He was thinking that he should very much like to see this beautiful, strange child again.

The warm, fervid afternoon was drawing to its close; already the heat was less intense. The sun's

rays, falling through the little gaps in the screen of leaves, were less bright and dazzling than they had been. Day was fading, and Asta Steele had risen to her feet.

'Do you want to go away?' asked he, suddenly taking her slim brown fingers in his own. 'Why must you go?' Then he said softly, 'Besides, dear child, when shall I see you again? I may meet you before I leave for Chatham, but after that? Tell me, if I send you an invitation, will you make your father bring you to a dance at Chatham? Do come—say you will. But why go now—why go?'

Asta looked down into his face; suddenly she seemed to know very well the wide-set blue eyes, the wide-nostirred nose, the bright, light hair looking lighter than the red-brown of his face, his well-set-up air, his entire aspect of well-being, the white patch of forehead where it had been shaded from the sun.

He had relinquished the warm, brown fingers, and detained her now by the piece of lace in the sleeve of her white dress, looking at her with eyes which held a caress.

Why go? Ah! why indeed? What was there to go back to? And Colonel Skene, looking into her face, saw the hesitation in her shadowy eyes.

'I'll tell you what we'll do,' he suggested. 'There's a bit of this garden as much like your dear, native St. Lucia as anything can be—a mass of roses and heliotrope and all the sweet things you love, sulphur-coloured tea-roses, such darlings, and dark

crimson ones. Let us go and walk there ; I want to show it to you.'

There seemed to have fallen a sudden stillness in the air ; the slight breeze of the early part of the afternoon had almost ceased to stir the leaves, and in the heat one could detect the acrid, salt smell of the hollyhocks, the honeysweet of the wallflowers and tobacco-plants, and the warm, summer sweet-ness of the heliotrope.

Why should she return ? Leaving the shade, they wandered away down the paths bordered with lupins and larkspurs, but no paths seemed to lead back to the world. The faint, distant murmur of voices mingled with the cawing of rooks.

With the heated stillness, with the scent of flowers, had come an exquisite intimacy into their conversa-tion ; it was now the talk of persons on the verge of a subtle understanding, and had that indescribable aroma of emotion which comes before a love, however slight, but drifts away at its fulfilment—that feeling of love, doubt, and curiosity which is called passion.

CHAPTER VIII

'It was all very fine—very fine indeed,' observed Judith. 'Very good fings to eat, and very pleasant in the kitchen. Oh yes, I'se glad I went.'

'And I'm glad you did if you liked it,' returned Asta. 'I was happy too, Judith—yes, I was very happy! It didn't seem like Borth at all; I seemed to be far away. I looked for you, but couldn't see you, yet you seem to have been somewhere where you saw everyone. I was very happy. Yet how is it now that I feel so sad? I feel, Judith, as if I couldn't smile or laugh. You told me once of an aunt of yours who had a spell cast on her. Was it like this—did she feel sad?'

'No, no, dat was a fetish; it was her lover who went to an Obi man for dat. Why, dere's no one here who could cast spells but me; only de black people know how. For sure, dear heart, no one has done so!'

'I don't know that,' said Asta quickly. 'Are you quite, quite sure, Judith? A great many people here hate me, and why should they not wish me evil?'

'Dey wish it yo' beyond doubt,' replied the woman, 'but dat's not enough—oh no, else where would be the use ob Obi men and charms, and, if an evil wish could kill, where would be de use ob spells?

Dey must be needed, else why do people hab dem ?
Tell me dat, Miss Asta.'

'The dark people have theirs, nurse, and the white have theirs. Yonder, in the church, is where the white people cast their spells, and papa is a sort of Obi man to them, isn't he ?'

'H'm, dose church spells don't sort o' come off,' said Asta's retainer contemptuously ; 'dat's de only drawback.'

'No, Judith, that's true. Do you remember that wet, terrible year when the hop-fields by the river were under water, and the oast-houses belonging to poor old John Vinter were so flooded that he couldn't use them ? I prayed for fine weather, for old John had been nice to me, and papa struck off our prayer for households and put in one for fine weather. Oh yes, and at all the services at church, too, we prayed and prayed.'

'Sho, and de Parish got more sloppy and more sloppy de more prayers went up.—So much for dat !'

'Then, nurse, when the rust got into the hops because they had no water, and the farmers were being ruined, didn't we pray for water ? Why, *you* actually came in to prayers, Judith—yes, *you* did ; you said you'd lend a hand because the farmers had danced with *you* or something, or one good turn deserved another. Don't you remember ?'

'I done forgit,' said Judith sulkily.

'Well, and what was the result ?' asked Asta discontentedly.

'De parish done got scorched up like a locust

had eaten it,' admitted Judith contemptuously.
‘Dere ain’t no good in all dat, else why don’t it work?’

‘There is no doubt about it, Judith, that there’s something very queer indeed about it. Papa has over and over again tried to explain to me why it doesn’t, and why the thing acts so strangely, and this is why it is:—When we get what we pray for it is because we prayed for it, but if we don’t get it it is because we have not had enough faith, or because it isn’t good for us—one or the other.’

‘H’m, dat’s a lame beast.—Obi man superior to dat. Obi man casts a spell dat work right through, whether or no. You tell Obi man Parish beastly wet, he don’t ’mediately bucket down more ob de liquid on de unfortunate creechars. Obi man would hab settled up dis Parish in style.’

The girl stood alternately looking listlessly out of the window and watching Judith ironing. The woman had had a quarrel with the servants in the kitchen, and had brought her work upstairs to Asta’s bedroom, and, on an ironing board balanced between her young mistress’s dressing-table and the backs of a couple of chairs, was manipulating some lace.

She was a goodnatured-looking negress of thirty. Her face was black, but had not the more pronounced West African characteristics of the flat nose and thick lips. The nose was only slightly flattened, but the widely-winged nostrils gave the face a mixed aspect of sadness and of dormant sensuality. There was no cap or adornment of any sort on Judith’s

head ; her short wool was gathered into an attempt at a knot behind, where it was secured by one or two hairpins. She had a well-developed bust and large hips, and was dressed, neatly and cleanly, in a black merino dress with a large red bow at the neck.

‘ Honey, you get me ‘nuver iron,’ she said presently. ‘ Dere’ll be more rows if I sees dat trash down below again.’

When the girl was gone she took up the lace, and, withdrawing a hairpin from her wool, opened the loops which had got closed in washing, and pulled it this way and that with her deft, narrow-palmed hands till the design was restored to shape, and, placing it once more on the board, patted the Vandyked edges into form ready to be pressed by the iron.

‘ Dis’ll be de same like new,’ she observed when Asta returned. ‘ Good fing yo’r aunt’s got me to do for her instead of her own fools downstairs.’

Asta put down the iron, and going to the window, listlessly leaned out. It was another day such as yesterday had been—a day of burning heat, and in this flat country, surrounded by hills, infinitely enervating and depressing for the inhabitants. But the girl did not feel it; her nostrils drank in the summer air, and her fervid eyes looked at the intense, white blue of the summer sky without flinching. Like a glimmering, white screen flecked with blue, and showing a faint ‘purple where the heather lived, the Kentish chalk-hills lay against the sky. She hated

them ; they seemed to be imprisoning her. Whereabouts was St. Lucia now ? Papa had told her that St. Lucia lay to the front of the house, but when she looked to that point there was no misty distance which she could weave into dreams, but only another chalk screen—hateful Blue-bell Hill, where she and Judith had gone blackberrying in autumn, in the cold and damp. At her right, over in the west, lay Maidstone—grey houses, with a tranquil, emerald-bordered river, seeming merely to trickle through the town, which appeared always asleep, except on market-days. Close beside it the garrison of Chatham—a dark patch with a reek of smoke lying above it like a grey crown. Asta gazed for some time at the distant garrison, and then withdrew her shoulders from the window, and came and stood by the ironing-board.

‘Nurse,’ said the child, ‘did you see me with the white officer yesterday?’

‘Yes, sure ; the finest gentleman there.’

‘Then why didn’t you say anything about him ?’

‘I sees everyfing when I’se out, chol’,’ observed the negress very solemnly, ‘and I hears everyfing, but I don’t say everyfing dat minute. I’se heard everyfing ’bout officer, Colonel Skene, from his mighty pleasant man in de kitchen, Mr. Walton. I ’spec’ he knows more ’bout him than de Colonel does hisself—gentlemen’s men generally do.’

‘Do they ?’

‘De reason is,’ continued Judith, ‘dat a man sees he’s master as often as de master does ; den he sees

him from de off-side, where it stands to reason de master ain't, 'cause he must be where he is; den he hears what uvers dat's been on de off-side says ob de master; den he knows what *he* finks ob de master; den he's got de master's letters to read and he's bills—all dat's very improvin'—and when all dese opinions is concentrated dey's boun' to be right.'

'Will you say that last thing again, Judith?'

'Dey's boun' to be right?'

'No, that other word—"concentrated"—what does it mean?'

'Speakin' naturally, it means brought togever in a lump.'

'And are the opinions good?' asked Asta, with a little anxiety. 'Do they say well of him?'

'De opinions is all very good—very good. De Colonel is a mighty pleasant, free livin', free lovin' gentleman, and fond ob females, and likes dem stylish and likes dem free to match. It don't seem like he's a marryin' man, though 'bout that Scripture says: "Him that standeth take heed lest ye fall." Mr. Walton done has he's doubts of him.'

'Not about his goodness?' asked Asta hastily.

'No, not 'bout dat; dere don't exist no doubts in Walton 'bout dat. Dat's supreme and indefensible; but 'bout he's marryin'.'

'Judith,' said the child after a pause, and indicating a bodice and skirt of some flimsy red material lying across a chair beside the ironing-board, 'I wish I had a beautiful white dress for the ball instead of this. I should like to look like the lady

in my picture. Do you think I could ever look as beautiful ?'

The negress considered her mistress gravely. She loved Asta, but, with the inherent admiration of the black races for the white, she would have considered her far more beautiful if she had resembled the young lady with fair, fluffy hair and blue eyes who gave out the letters at the village post-office at Borth. She said, however :—

' Yo' more dark, chol', dan dat female, but de white men like de dark gals, and de dark men like de white. Depends on what eyes is seein' yo' how handsome yo' is, so dere's hopes for all, and a mighty good fing for some females I knows dat it is so.'

' I should like to be very beautiful,' said the girl. ' I should like to marry a prince. I would go far away from home with him in a ship, and poor papa and you, Judith, should come too. Aunt I would leave behind. Yes, why should I take her?—for she seems to like it, so she should continue to live here; but I—I should never more see these ugly, hateful people, cruel people who tell lies. How have they behaved to me since I came here, and how do they treat papa? I learnt their religion from him when I first came here, and I have acted as it told me, but they have not done their part. They pretend that they are imitating Christ, nurse, but my opinion is that Christ must be very, very angry when He sees them. Oh no, they are not Christians. If they say they are, they lie. Would He have slighted

me, do you suppose, leaving me out of every pleasure, ridiculing me, never asking me to enter His house? I see them chattering about me, Judith. Only yesterday they wouldn't even play their games with me. What is the good of their Church to them, and what is the good of papa's sermons if they listen and don't heed them? They will be most utterly damned, Judith; but, if they believe all this, how is it that they are not kinder to me for His sake, for I have done nothing?"

"Dat's true, sure 'nough; deys better have a care."

"This Christ they speak of was good and kind; He took people's part against cruelty. In that window in church He looks very sorry for the woman with the beautiful hair. It is the only pretty thing in the church. Do you think they can really believe that sin is wrong, and that sinners will be punished? Could they act so if they did? Is it possible? Are they not afraid of hell?"

"Don't believe the creechars fink at all 'bout it," observed the negress; "same as cook bein' impudent to me. It ain't likely I'se goin' to stomach dat, no more will her Creator, and dat she'll find."

"This Colonel is almost the only pleasant person I have met, and he—he will go away, Judith. You know in St. Lucia they were always changing."

"Dere's Mr. Safford pleasant person," suggested Judith encouragingly.

"No, no, he isn't," said Asta; "you couldn't really call him pleasant, could you, Judith? And even if he

were, the back of his head goes straight down to his back, and he talks of things I can't understand. He doesn't say the things the Colonel does.'

'He don't hab de Colonel's experiaunces, dat's de reason,' observed the negress cheerfully. 'De experiaunces is what gives all de style to love-makin', and if de poor man don't hab dose experiaunces, stan's to reason he can't shake roun' in de same style as dose dat has.'

'Ah, Judith, I believe I know what you mean, but it isn't shaking round. Colonel Skene doesn't do that; but—well—he's different in every way from Mr. Safford. . . . Supposing, nurse, Colonel Skene is offering me a cup of tea, and supposing Mr. Safford is, too.—Mr. Safford says, "Tea is a cooling beverage in this heat, Asta," and holds it out—so—and shows his front teeth—so. The white Colonel says—I do not know what he says, and yet I do know every word he spoke. He says some things with his blue eyes, and other things he says with his tongue, and no one who has ever heard his speech can forget anything. I know now his look when he plucked that jasmine and gave it to me; I know it all. I did not think, Judith, that men were made like this Colonel, but I am glad they are.'

'Dat Colonel want a good spell on him,' said Judith; 'dat's what he want—somefin' in his soup. Don't seem to me, Miss Asta, any good any female makin' love to dat man unless dey's got somefin' to hold on to him. By what Mr. Walton say, dat

Colonel like one of dose rogue elephants dat gets uvers into de trap but don't go he's self. Tee hee !'

'Asta !' cried Mrs. Case's voice from below,
'Asta !'

The negress and her young mistress exchanged glances.

'Yes, aunt,' the girl replied.

'What are you doing ?'

'Nothing.'

'A profitable way of spending your time. I thought so. Come down, child, at once, and help me.'

'Never mind, you and me go into Maidstone dis afternoon see de shops, chol,' whispered the servant as Asta left.

CHAPTER IX

MRS. CASE was standing at a bookshelf in a little room downstairs, called in the family ‘the lending library.’ The collection was composed of about a hundred well-worn books and pamphlets, which were lent out for the Sunday reading of the parishioners, with the idea that their literary interest and charm would destroy in the latter all desire for the village alehouse.

Mrs. Case was returning to its place a crumpled, dirty paper book as her niece entered.

‘What is the good of leaving the books to you, Asta?’ she asked. ‘Didn’t you know that Edward Bates’s mother was a drunkard?’

‘Yes.’

‘Very well; why, when Edward called for a book for her, give him one on the Deceased Wife’s Sister Bill? Here is the book; he has just brought it back. You know our Drunkards’ Series. Why didn’t you give him one of those?’

‘I thought Edward’s mother might be angry and think it rude, and I thought she might beat Edward. Edward thought so, too. That last time you gave him one she was nasty, and he said he would rather have one on some other subject.’

‘It is Edward’s duty to reform his family with

such instruments as God allows us to place in his hands,' replied Mrs. Case briskly, 'and the less he and you think the better. Well, I've given him a good one to-day that she'll not soon forget—a stinger for next Sunday afternoon.'

The girl was silent, and Mrs. Case bustled out of the library and into a stone passage outside, leading to the kitchens and larders. Opening a door on their right, they found themselves in a room with an open window veiled with a wire blind. Various cold meats and other eatables lay about on slate shelves.

'I want you, Asta, to get out of those lazy dreams of yours and get into a *real* world,' said her aunt. 'I should like you to be a nice English-trained girl, up early, with smooth hair and a neat apron; a girl who would come down here and tell me what the meals for the day were to be, not I tell you. You have no idea of housekeeping. What, for instance, would you do with that?'

Mrs. Case, as she spoke, indicated a rabbit hanging by the heels, with what appeared to be a tin helmet on its head.

Asta's shadowy eyes rested on its outlines for a moment.

'Set it in the oven, I suppose,' she replied.

'Set it in the oven! Now, child, run to the kitchen and fetch the cookery-book, and find out all the different ways. Have you got it? Now, look at the index: "R"—rabbit. That's it; now read down.'

Asta, thus advised, began in a droning voice to listlessly declaim from its index:—

“ “ Rabbit, History of;
“ “ , Fecundity of;
“ “ , Migratory habits of;
“ “ , Fertilizing properties of;
“ “ , Opinions of the Ancients.” ”

‘ For goodness’ sake, child, come to the practical parts,’ said Mrs. Case briskly and with impatience. ‘ Who cares what a rabbit’s opinion of the Ancients was ! We’re modern, and we want our dinner. Find Stew—here we come :—“ Rabbit stewed, rabbit roast, rabbit larded, rabbit in sauce, rabbit——” ’

‘ He can be done *anyhow*,’ suggested Asta, with some slight indications of restiveness in her manner ; ‘ it doesn’t seem to matter what’s done.’

‘ Asta,’ said her aunt, ‘ it matters a great deal. No, I don’t mean this particular thing, for I, luckily, have some knowledge and can decide about a dinner ; but it is not this alone. You are the same all through ; you take no interest in life. Now, I called you down to-day just to show you how lost you would be in ordering a dinner, and as it is a sacred duty which, as a wife, will some day fall to your lot, I—— For goodness’ sake, child, are you listening ? Straighten your back, and look at me then.’

‘ Yes, aunt.’

‘ Asta, what do you imagine I asked you down here for ? ’

‘ To find out how to cook the——’

‘ To find out ! Do you imagine I should want advice on housekeeping—and from you ? No, I wanted to show you how ill indeed you would fare

in conducting a home of your own—how miserable would be your lot—and to tell you that there is such a prospect possible for you—ah! and in the near future. You are a very happy, lucky girl.'

Asta looked a little startled, and very decidedly uncomfortable.

'What do you mean, Aunt Jane? Where?' she asked.

'Come away from this larder, child,' replied Mrs. Case; 'this is no place to discuss your future in. I wish your father would let Charlie Luck clip that creeper; it allows not a breath of air to come in on the meat, and makes it simply impossible to house-keep in this weather. Yes, Asta, I want to have a long talk with you. Lift that chicken into the safe, please, and turn the key on it—one never knows.'

'Here is the key, aunt.'

Asta Steele followed Mrs. Case along the passages and into the living part of the house; the front hall was full of chairs, placed seat to seat and covered with dust-cloths, and sounds of vigorous brushing came from the drawing-room, the contents of which had evidently been turned out.

On the floor of the hall against the wall stood prints of 'Harmony' and the 'Black Brunswicker,' while on the hall-table was a large, gilt-framed, coloured engraving of a number of nude women with long black or else bright yellow hair, bearing away through the waves the body of a dead baby. The picture would have lacked propriety but for the presence of the baby, who showed pale-grey

against the ladies' glowing skins, and of two angels who floated above the procession carrying lyres and lilies, and gave a certain tone to the proceedings. The hall-table was further covered with drawing-room vases and ornaments. A statue of Lord Palmerston in a frock-coat looking as if kept out by a crinoline, stood under the table for safety, in company with a very roly-poly infant Samuel in Parian and a large Chinese chess-box.

The room was very seldom used, but Lord Palmerston and the marble baby and the box went under the table every week regularly, until the room, as Mrs. Case expressed it, had been 'turned out,' and was ready to receive them again.

Mrs. Case gave a brisk, sharp look of approval at these objects, and at the swathed outlines of the chairs, and went into the dining-room, followed by her niece.

'Now, Asta,' she said, 'I have a piece of news for you, and one you should be thankful to hear. Did you notice anyone being particularly attentive yesterday?'

'Who, aunt?'

'That is for you to tell me. Did you not observe that you were the recipient of attentions?'

Asta shuffled her feet uneasily.

'I thought all our acquaintances behaved very nastily and not as Christians, as usual, and that when Mr. Safford and Colonel Skene tried to get them to play with me they wouldn't—that's all I noticed.'

'Oh, you did notice so much! Now I have a piece of news. Sit down and don't fidget your feet. A gentleman has proposed for you; he wishes to marry you. Who that is I need not say.'

'You mean Mr. Safford again?'

'You know I do. He yesterday asked me point-blank if he might marry you; this is the third time.'

'But I've told you, aunt, I don't care for Mr. Safford.'

'And I have explained to him that you are not precisely in love with him yet, and he says that doesn't matter; you are young, he says, and can be moulded, and he will in time make you think just as he does; and that is the point, Asta, that I want to talk over with you. Before he marries you, he wishes you to be different in one or two ways.'

Asta bent her dark brows on Mrs. Case.

'Yes, aunt?'

'In confidence yesterday he mentioned one or two little things he wished altered before he would feel justified in marrying you. But you are young, he says, and can be trained; and, Asta, he wants that training put in hand at once.'

'Yes, aunt.'

'His housekeeper is getting old, and no longer able to look after his comforts.'

'Then let him get a young one.'

'Asta, it is you he wants; a man gets tired of living with hirelings.'

'And should I not be a hireling?'

'Certainly not! What rubbish! But he was

talking yesterday about your appearance, and, Asta, he thinks, with me, that you spoil yourself.'

'What?'

'That you spoil yourself, child. He does not like your hair.'

'I'm sure I don't like his,' observed the girl sulkily.

'Asta, that is beside the mark. A man's appearance is nothing. There are so few men that, instead of criticizing their looks, one should only be extremely thankful that they are there at all; but he says that smooth hair is a comely thing in a woman, and looks restful, and more like that of a clergyman's wife. That's one thing, and then he wishes you confirmed.'

'What is the good of Confirmation, aunt? He has been confirmed himself, and *now* look at him! Why, all these people have been confirmed, and has it done them any good?'

'Be that as it may, Asta, it has nothing to do with you; you are not responsible for them, but you are for yourself. Your refusal of Confirmation has long been a disgrace to the parish. Your father is weak and good-natured with you, as he is with everybody. Mr. Safford openly spoke of it as a disgrace to him not to have broken you in at once. He spoke in no measured terms of your father's indulgence and false kindness to you. The self-indulgent life you now lead, you will have to leave behind you eventually; far better to do so under the guidance of a good man like Mr. Safford. Then

he disapproves of Judith; he says it would be a great good to the village if subscriptions could be raised to send her home: her goings on are a scandal. He says he would head such a subscription, and consider it cheap; he says a licentious heathen (that's what he calls *her*) must have a demoralizing influence on all around her, and that you and she are too much together for your good.'

'Mr. Safford is always sneering at papa and—yes—at all of us,' said Asta; 'he wants to separate Judith and me, and he would separate me from papa, too, if he could. Don't you think if there was a chance of happiness in marrying him I would take it? I will never go to live with Mr. Safford in that house of his by the river; I should die there or go mad. The river washes up at the feet of the apple-trees close to the house; I always feel there as if I was in some sad dream—nothing ever changes there. It is the dried grass and the china cat on the mantelpiece that make one feel so wretched, and the place smells of lavender and of biscuits. I hate the place and the portrait of his ugly mother; twice he has led me up to it and told me what an example she was. Perhaps she was' (sulkily). 'I don't care; I'm not going there! As for Mr. Safford himself, I dislike his darkness and his thin, pale face—he is not a man—and since he says he doesn't like my hair, I do not like his having no side-teeth; he has thin hands and pale, long wrists. Say no more. I will not! You have often, often spoken of him, and I have told you the same. Let this end it.'

Asta's face had changed ; the wide-winged nostrils were dilated, the eyes darkly frowning. Mrs. Case had not before seen her with just this expression, and pondered on its ugliness. Then she said, with an air of conviction :—

‘ Upon my word, you ought to be most thankful that anyone wants to give you a home. I doubt whether he would if he saw you in this temper and looking so ugly.’

‘ There would be much worse tempers than this if I were forced to live with Mr. Safford,’ replied the girl.

‘ Oblige me, Asta, by not talking in that coarse way of living with Mr. Safford,’ said her aunt.

‘ And what are *you* talking of?’ replied the girl with contempt. ‘ What is marriage for? Why may you speak of “marriage,” if I may not say “living with”? It is like everything else I have seen since I came here—everything is ashamed to be what it is, and tries to be something else. Why is nothing true? Why does everyone pretend that he is very good when he is really wicked and bad—yes, and most likely will be damned?’

‘ Marriage is an institution that enables a woman to be a helpmeet to a man,’ said Mrs. Case, disregarding her niece’s remarks. ‘ It is a blessed——’

‘ Then let his housekeeper do it.’

‘ Asta,’ continued Mrs. Case, rising and unlocking a drawer in the sideboard. ‘ Have you any idea what is to become of you when your father dies?’

‘ What do you mean?’ asked the girl, with a white

face. ‘Papa is not likely to die. Why do you say this—why do you?’

‘Your father’s chest is delicate; he has serious illnesses every winter, and I ask what is to become of you, once he and his money are gone? His income dies with him. He has nothing to leave you, and you would have instantly to leave this Vicarage. What would you do?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You have practically no education—nothing to help yourself with. How would you get a living?’

‘I should not care,’ said the girl, with trembling lips, ‘what became of me, once poor papa went. I should not care if I starved. He is the one—the only—thing I love! I dare not think how dreadful the world would be then—I—’

‘Do not cry, Asta,’ said Mrs. Case, not unkindly. ‘I am not saying your father is dying; I am only trying to do my duty towards you in placing things before you.’

‘When poor papa left me years ago with dear Auntie Julia and Auntie Melanie, I loved him then. He was so good to me on board ship. He brought me up on deck, and let me sit on his lap, buttoned up in his great-coat—there was room for me, I was so small. And Auntie’s friends used to ask me sometimes if I had forgotten papa; but I never forgot him—I knew I never should. And he is just the same. He and I and Judith are alone here—he and—’

‘Now Asta, Asta! If I’d thought that a simple

proposal of marriage would have brought down these floods of tears! I've just been getting this newspaper out of the drawer; dry your eyes, and don't be a silly girl. I want you to look at this.'

Mrs. Case, as she spoke, was unfolding a paper, and laying it on the table before Asta. The girl still sobbed convulsively. Her dark face was pathetic as she strove to master herself; her slender, pale fingers trembled as she held a handkerchief to her mouth.

The newspaper, unfolded, disclosed five diagrams, consisting of black discs filled in with varying numbers of white spots.

'Now, child, what do you think this is? There, there! What a colour Judith gets your handkerchiefs! Put it away, for goodness' sake! What do you think this is?'

'Is it the moon in eclipse?' asked Asta, in a broken voice and still sobbing.

'It is not the moon; it is the statistics of the marriage system of Great Britain and Ireland.'

'Yes, aunt.'

'These discs are numbered 19, 28, 35, 40, and 48. The white dots show the number of offers that girls get at those five ages, and how, as they grow older, their chances die out, leaving them, as you will see, at 48 with one miserable white blotch—indeed, I'm not sure whether it is not a printer's error. I don't know whether it is really meant at all. Just give me my glasses.'

'They're up in your hair, aunt.'

'So they are. Well, I don't know whether it's

meant or not, but, anyhow, it's nothing to boast of. Whereas at 19 you see there are—how many?—36 offers, at 28—this is very significant!—there are only 20, a falling off of 16. Mark that! At 35 only 8 suitors; at 40 only 5. Now, Asta, I am not telling you all this; these things are not *my* invention; these are statistics done by clever men from London, who have studied the question up there and *know*. Don't you think this should make young women beware?"

"What of, Aunt Jane?"

"What of? Of being left high and dry, with no visible means of support; of being obliged to work for their own living, when they could have had a man to work for them if they had not been foolish. I should have thought such pictures as these would depress a girl into her very shoes, and cause her to look about her briskly."

"One of the youngest girl's proposals is only a breadcrumb that's been folded in with the paper, aunt, if you look," Asta now pointed out, with subdued interest. "But, even then, fifty-five proposals is a great many, surely, unless a girl is *very* good and *very* beautiful indeed. Do you think these discs can be correct? Or do you think anything can have gone wrong with them? But I suppose they have ways of calculating up in London that we don't—"

"Who said fifty-five?"

"Well, if she gets 35 at 19, and then 20 more at 28, she has had 55 at 28."

"Give me the paper, child. I didn't read the

account rightly, perhaps. It *is* queer; I don't myself understand it. Ah, yes, here it is—my mistake! At 19, 35 out of 50 marry; at 28, 20 out of 50, and so on. The statistics are all right; they prove that it is next door to impossible to marry, and all young people should read them. Dear me, in the old days it was not so !'

'How was it, aunt, do you suppose ?'

'I couldn't tell you. All the girls had beaux round them paying attentions; all the young men married earlier and married oftener; our manners were less free, and I suppose the young men saw it, and liked us better; for you may take it from me, Asta, that there is nothing that a young man more resents than any forwardness.'

'And were the young men handsomer and pleasanter than these ?'

'Well, my dear, you remember your uncle Case? He was the gayest and handsomest of them all. You can take him as a specimen.'

'Yes, aunt,' said Asta, with a melancholy smile.

'And I could wish, Asta, that *you* would cultivate a more downcast expression of the eye with men, and not look direct at them as you do. If the young girl comes forward, the young man instantly retreats; if the girl retreats, the young man pursues. This, Asta, has been going on for centuries.'

'I don't see who there is to retreat from here,' said the girl sulkily. 'I have retreated from the only man there was, and now you say I shouldn't.'

'Ah! you don't do it the right way. Now, Asta,

dry your eyes and be sensible ; I have nothing but your good at heart, and I want you to seriously think over Mr. Safford's proposal. You needn't reply at once, but think of it. Judith, I hope, hasn't been putting you against him ?'

' No ; she says he is a pleasant person.'

' I'm glad to hear she's sensible enough to think so. What is she doing upstairs ?'

' Ironing white lace for my ball-dress.'

An annoyed expression flitted across Mrs. Case's features.

' Ah, I hope you will not be turned from Mr. Safford by this ball,' said she ; ' I am quite willing that your father should take you, but this is not a scene into which Mr. Safford can follow you, and do not be led astray from a solid man's solid regard for you by a number of flirting military men. I hope you are not thinking anything about Colonel Skene ?'

' No, aunt.'

' And I hope he didn't pretend to make love to you ?'

' No—o.'

' I am glad for you, Asta, to go to this dance, but remember that Colonel Skene has the reputation of a fast man ; his character is none too good. Believe nothing that he says ; such men mean nothing.'

' Then how is it that everyone seems to like him so much ? I saw Dean Alton introducing him to his daughter. Can he know, do you suppose ? Surely it isn't that he doesn't mind ?'

' Colonel Skene is the heir to his aunt's—Lady

Allen Morton's—estates. She dislikes him, and doesn't give him a penny at present, but that's the case; and then, too, remember that the Lord called not the just but sinners to repentance. Moreover, child, I wish to goodness you would take what is said less literally. Directly one says anything against anyone, you seem immediately to imagine them in eternal punishment; and what you say about being damned is so unladylike, and so horribly uncomfortable to listen to, and it shocks people. You mustn't do it.'

'But papa preaches it from the pulpit.'

'There, there now, Asta,' said Mrs. Case impatiently, 'I simply tell you you're not to say it. What people give out from pulpits is quite another thing. Now, Asta, I think I've said enough to show any right-minded girl with sense what she should do. You might now go and lift the coverings very carefully off the chairs, and dust the ornaments and put them back. Go upstairs and bathe your eyes first; I'm sure if a young man——'

'I'se makin' dis here ball-dress travel,' Judith was observing to her young mistress a minute later; 'dis here'll have style 'bout it, dis here lace——What yo' cry for, Asta?' asked she quickly as she looked up and perceived her mistress's face. 'What yo' cry for?'

'Only at something that aunt said.'

'And what she say to yo', honey? What she say? She better be careful.'

'Only, Judith, about poor papa. She says, what I know, that he is not strong, and that he is so often ill in winter, and then she said that some cruel, terrible winter—— Nurse, think of it. Oh, why is life so merciless? . . .'

Sitting on her bed, Asta again began sobbing heart-brokenly.

'That is not all. Last night, Judith, I had a dream. I did not tell you, but that was what made me feel so down. It was a bright day to begin with, and he and I were in the country; the hops were out, and we seemed to be by Allington Lock, where those pink flowers grow by the river, and where the river-weeds tangle on the oars and drift below the stream. Judith, it was horrible! The sun went down, leaving only a tiny glimmer like a gas jet, and the dreadful snow came down; it wound round the pink flowers, and seemed covering us as we sat in the boat. Papa didn't stir or speak to me, and I saw that he was dead and that I was alone. . . .

'The day seemed turned to a bluish night like moonlight, and the little bit of red sun still looked like a gas lamp. I could see the path by the river and people on it, but I knew they would not help me. They have never minded me, have they? Judith, it was unutterable! I knew I should feel just so if I lost papa; I should feel wretched, no longer caring, desperate! I woke, trembling and sick with fear. It was so real that I dared not go to sleep without seeing papa, and making sure he was alive, and I crept downstairs. I listened at the

door, and when I heard his breathing I came up again ; but I know now just what it will be like.'

' Dem very foolish fancies. Yo'r papa——'

' Yes, yes, I know all you would say ; but there the thought lies like a stone on my heart. And then, nurse, aunt went on to say that I must marry, for in the end there would be no one to keep me or to give me anything to live on. Girls, she says, Judith, have to go and live with men if they have no money—she has often and often told me so—and then the men have to keep them. They are obliged by the police—it's what they call marriage—and they have nothing to do except to do things in the house. She says Mr. Safford wants to keep me as a helpmeet ; but don't you think, Judith, that if I were anywhere but here, I might see someone who would love me and whom I might love ? Is there no fate for me in the world but one I should detest ? Is that so, really ? Is it possible ? And then, too, she has been showing me some pictures of what happens here in England to girls, something that's been discovered by gentlemen up in London—how, as women grow older, men love them less, and they have less and less chance of happiness ; and she seems to say that if I don't marry Mr. Safford I shall never have a husband at all. Is it like this in St. Lucia, Judith ?'

' People very nasty to uvers all de world over, and men like pretty girls all de world over ; dat's dere nature. Can't break dem in from dat more'n yo' break bears and chil'un from likin' molasses.'

'I have brought the paper to show you,' said Asta, sitting up with a long sighing breath, and drying her eyes. 'Here it is.'

Judith had been manipulating the lace on the red ball-dress, and now laid it aside and examined the newspaper.

'You say dis done by gentlemen from London? Den dis here very serious, chol'. I not like de looks ob dis—not good to be in a hemisphere where dis bound to occur. Tcher, if dese gentlemen not done gone wrong in dere discoveries, dis mighty unpleasant.'

'Yes, yes, I knew you would say so—I knew it. And what is to be done *now*?'

'I dun know what's to be done,' replied the negress moodily. 'Pity dese discoveries not made before you and me came here; dat's de most on-pleasant circumstance 'bout it. Pity dese gentlemen don't make dese observations earlier, prevent more females crowdin' on dose fifty men. It ain't dere fault; stan's to reason dey can't do more dan dey can do in de matter ob marryin'. Deys each asked thirty-six women!'

'There are different ways of reading these statistics, nurse; I don't think you've got the right——'

'Dere's no right way 'bout it, Miss Asta,' said the negress moodily. 'If dere ain't no winders to a house yo' can't see daylight. I don't see how dose males is to stan' de rush ob female women; dis like de sea comin' in on dem; dis like to sweep dem off dere blime feet; dis altogether out ob de fitness ob tings.'

An' now dere's you an' me. I don't see me way—don't really seem like I *can* keep up me heart any more.'

' Yet there appear to be men at the village dances, dear Judith. You always dance.'

' Dance !' observed the woman with dejection ; ' yes, but dat's a poor comfort. Appears now like dose men is only part ob de fifty dat's got dere backs agin de wall, an' how long dose men last out ? I put dat question.'

' You had better return, poor Judith,' said Asta sadly. ' If things are like this, you had better return —indeed you had.'

' Dis very easy for me to git away back,' said the woman ; ' but dis mean leavin' yo', me honey, an' I don't leave yo', chol'. Yo' me eyes an' me heart ; dere don't exist anyfing in me life dat ain't yo'. Dis is a black business, by dis account, but I stay because yo' here, Asta—dat's so.'

' The steward coming over to England proposed to you, Judith—yes, he did ; he proposed marriage. He loved you.'

' Ah, an' between de money he got for de han'-kerchiefs, an' Cologne he take from one sea-sick passenger and sell to anuver, an' dere grateful feelin's at seeing him up an' spry an' kind to dem when dey was sick dereselves, de wife ob dat man might be happy.'

' Yes ; and notice was taken of you by someone else on board. He also loved you.'

' Sho', a fine figure ob a man ! Dat's so, dat's so. In de whole range I'se rarely seen a better.'

'He also proposed marriage; that's two in less than a fortnight.'

'I don't fink dat man propose nuffin' in partik'lar,' observed Judith guardedly; 'but a fine figurehead he was—a fine figurehead!'

'So that there's no need for you to fret, Judith.'

'All dis was in uver longitudes,' said the negress moodily, 'an' de same rule don't serve. Dese London gentlemen don't sottle up de longitudes, an' 'tis well for dose longitudes dat dey don't. What dey say is, dis an' dat is boun' to occur in Great Britain an' Irelan'; in dose two hemispheres yo' find dis an' dat, dey say; but dey don't say what occurs on de ship, an' dis is de reason: a ship moves along—dere ain't no rule for it, an' a statistic don't touch it. If dat ship anchor up by Great Britain where dese females is waitin' on de shore, an' de London fellers has seen dem, an' arrange what's to happen, den nex' day dat ship is sailin' for Trinidad, where, perhaps, please God, dese females is more brief—perhaps dey ain't barkin' on de shores dere. Anyways, please God, de London gentlemen ain't counted dem up an' sottled dem, an' it gives dem a chance. De troof is, dis here is a question of longitudes. Keep in the right longitudes, dat's what I say.'

'The difficulty is to know which *is* a right one,' said the child.

CHAPTER X

'ASTA,' said Mrs. Paton, 'I've come to see whether you can drive into Maidstone with me. It won't be amusing or pleasant—it's a vilely hot day—but Bullfinch shies whenever Brayley gets into the carriage, and I cannot go quite alone, as I'm shopping. Run and put on your poppy hat, child.'

Asta and Mrs. Case had been standing, dressed for a walk, by the front door of the Vicarage as Mrs. Paton's pony-carriage drove in. A basket which Asta carried indicated that they were bent on some charitable errand.

'I can give you a lift, too,' Mrs. Paton continued, addressing Mrs. Case. 'I suppose you are going to the village?'

Yes, Mrs. Case was going to the village, and, the basket being heavy, would be thankful for a lift.

She had just seated herself in the carriage beside Mrs. Paton, when the figure of Judith appeared at the front door beside them, and hurriedly made for the gate.

She was dressed in black, as usual, and wore a large, transparent picture-hat of lace and bugles, which was further decorated with two huge white wings.

'Where are you going, Judith?' demanded Mrs. Case. 'Why aren't you at work?'

'I'se finkin' to go out an' take a walk,' replied the negress, still edging off towards the gate. 'I'se feel queer in me constitution since I git up dis mornin'. Dis not good to be in de house too much; de physicians say dis——'

'Quite the duchess, going out in the morning and leaving my servants to do the work!' interrupted Mrs. Case indignantly. 'I don't believe in your illnesses. What have you got your smart dress and that hat on for? What are you up to, eh?'

'I'se got de headaches so I can't wear me garden hat; de garden hat gib me de brown agues.'

'Well, you'll get a sunstroke in that.'

Judith tilted forward the nightmare of lace and wings, which was a travesty of a Bond Street creation that Mrs. Dalmer had worn at her garden-party.

'I don't go to git strokes,' she observed placidly; 'dey don't sottle in me wool.'

'That hat is exactly like Mrs. Dalmer's last,' Mrs. Case pointed out angrily to her companion. 'It is scandalous!'

'It is certainly after it—at an appreciable distance,' responded the other.

'I don't see dat because Mrs. Dalmer she wear a hat dat uvers is to wear nuffin'. I suppose if Mrs. Dalmer she wear a skyirt uvers is to go in——'

'Enough of this!' cried Mrs. Case, rising angrily in the carriage. 'I simply say you are not to do it.'

In the distance Mr. Steele had been instructing Charlie Luck to clip a grass border, and now, relinquishing the scissors, approached the ladies. In the diversion thus caused Judith made her escape. Once out of sight, she picked up her dress and ran with all her might down the road and over the fields towards the railway-station. Her hat swung and bobbed as she ran, and a thickly-starched white petticoat rustled fiercely on the stubble.

'Racin' like yo' was a hoss!' she muttered to herself. 'But yo'll ketch it by de tail, Judith, if yo's smart.'

'So you ladies are off driving this fine morning?' said the Vicar. 'That's pleasant.'

'Asta is going into Maidstone, but I am only going as far as Widow Morley's with these things,' replied his sister-in-law.

'Isn't Widow Morley the old harridan who was so abusive to you once, Mr. Steele?' asked Mrs. Paton.

'She has been troublesome at times.'

'And you are sending her—what is it—port wine? Do you know you are encouraging immorality? If people who behave ill get port wine, what incentive to be good?'

Asta Steele, as bidden, had put on the poppy hat, and now, a slim white figure, sat opposite her aunt and Mrs. Paton, with her back to the pony.

'They are always immoral,' she remarked sadly. 'It is not port that causes it. This woman behaves ill, no matter what she drinks.'

'I am afraid she is not a Christian,' observed Mrs. Paton, with a glance at the child.

'She is not ; she is a wicked woman,' assented Asta gravely. 'For my part, I would rather give this to Judith ; but I must, of course, even do as papa says.'

'My dear, my dear !' responded the Vicar, 'you must leave me to carry on my parochial duties—you really must. This woman has behaved ill, she has been tiresome—yes, tiresome expresses it—indeed, there is a vein of tiresomeness about ; but that is no reason why I, in turn, should behave ill and neglect my duties. No, no, my child. Dear me, how pretty the country looks ! You will have a most enjoyable drive !'

'Papa is very, very good to these people,' murmured Asta as they drove out of the Vicarage grounds. 'He is too good ! Seeing that Widow Morley and others were not as rich as ourselves, he put aside money and bought a bath-chair for their use. It was from that bath-chair that Mrs. Morley said such cruel things to papa. She was wheeled up here on purpose.'

'An old woman's nonsense,' returned Mrs. Case comfortably. 'Goodness me, child ! what does it matter ? Your father's duty is to see to these people, and he does it. As to the word "immoral," it should never pass a young girl's lips. If a young man were here now and heard your words, he would imagine you knew what it meant, and be fearfully shocked. Old Mrs. Morley is not immoral ; that is something quite different.'

'These very antique ladies are never immoral, Asta,' remarked Mrs. Paton; 'it is not their fault—only their misfortune. Talking of men, you had a nice man at the Dalmers' garden-party. My dear child, you have now the dislike of every female heart in the place, and should feel proud. The goodies dislike you because you have taken Mr. Safford, the others because you monopolized their dear Colonel, the only man here with anything resembling a past, and therefore more precious than a ruby to them. How did you like him, child?'

'I liked him.'

'I think,' observed Mrs. Case, 'that men like that should stay in London—much better than coming down here, upsetting girls' minds and talking rubbish. I'm sure we don't want that sort of thing in the country.'

'No, we don't want much in the country,' assented the other; 'stout boots and a few dinner-parties—that's enough. But think what good it does these worn-out *viveurs* to get to a place like this, with mud and pure air, and nice country girls. This particular gentleman, however, is not empty-headed, and does not talk rubbish; he passed second out of the Staff College, and is very smart indeed. Dulness, dear Mrs. Case, is not a certain indication of either goodness or brains, though it often stands for both. What did he talk to you about, Asta?'

'He spoke of many things,' said the child. 'He talked of plants, and of how the tiny snakes in America lie asleep in the bell-shaped flowers. He

spoke, too, of the larkspurs, and said there were few blue flowers in the world because the *bichus* liked them less, and thought them less pretty.'

'Nothing very compromising in all this,' observed Mrs. Paton. 'Quite like Brewer's "Guide to Science."'

'He said that in India he hunted—yes, and killed one day a large man-eating tiger that had devoured a great many of the natives, and had just taken a child. He went out on purpose. I thought it very good of him.'

'I dare say the tiger thought otherwise,' yawned Mrs. Paton. 'Think of him, cut off in his prime, when he was having his dessert off a child !'

'It was a savage and cruel brute; the animal measured fourteen feet from his tail to his head when laid out.'

'I am not surprised at his length; I am only surprised he wasn't longer. I have often wondered if the tigers in India are made of indiarubber. Once dead, they seem capable of stretching to any extent.'

'There was, while he was in some foreign land—I forget where—a man-eating jaguar; him also he killed. Colonel Skene told me that when it happened he was lurking outside a temple, ready to kill and eat the worshippers who came out.'

'I suppose you mean the jaguar was. And what did he measure ?'

'He did not say.'

'Ah! I suppose he weighed *him*. He weighed tons, I'm sure.'

'He did not say so.'

'Ah! he left a decent mystery round that one. But, you see'—addressing Mrs. Case—'there is nothing very demoralizing in his conversation.'

'I don't know about demoralizing, but I call it foolish nonsense to talk to a young girl about. A sensible marrying man doesn't waste his time so; and, talking of education, Mr. Safford, now, is educated if you like—a University man, fond of really clever things, like Archæology. Dear me! the drawings he has done of windows and arches, and knows exactly all about the different styles! I'm sure, one day he was telling us about Henry the Eighth and his style, or period; I don't know it well enough to repeat, but I was spellbound. I expect even you, Asta, saw how clever it was.'

'I did not listen,' said the girl.

'No, you'd rather he'd be out blowing the head off a lion or tiger; but, let me tell you, that is not how good husbands spend their time, and that is not Mr. Safford's *style*, so don't expect it.'

'No, Asta,' observed Mrs. Paton's sleepy voice. 'So if you hear the report of firearms, don't imagine that he is thinning out the tigers of the district.'

'I do not think of him at all,' muttered the girl.

'Did Colonel Skene show you the mermaid on his arm?' asked Mrs. Paton presently.

'The mermaid?'

'Yes, a tattooed mermaid on his arm, with a long blue fish-tail and a looking-glass in her hand. I am surprised he did not.'

'He did not show it me.'

'Well, it does not matter ; he exhibits it to even elderly married women, so it is no distinction. Nor yet the guinea-pig—wasn't that on view ?'

'I saw nothing,' replied Asta.

'He showed more respect for you by not displaying his arms,' said Mrs. Case. 'I never heard of such things!—Here we are at Widow Morley's. Hand me the basket and the bottle, child.—It's about the best thing I've been told of him yet.'

'And even that is negative,' observed Mrs. Paton.

'Good-bye,' said the other, standing in the dusty road, a little drab, alert figure, and looking from under the faded Parma violets and dusty wings and hackle of the boat-shaped hat. 'I'll leave you my parasol for the heat, Asta, and mind you put it up, and don't sit in the glare as if you liked it—it looks so common. And mind you hold the reins while Mrs. Paton shops, and don't fall into one of your day-dreams. You should try to get rid of your stoop on a day like this, sitting there with nothing to do and pure country air round you. Take three deep breaths to fill your lungs, and then slowly breathe them out, as the hygiene lecturer at the Town Hall told us to do. Did you go, Mrs. Paton ? The second day was on how to wash the face and hands.'

'So I heard. It was very nice for young beginners, but when a person has had a face and a couple of hands as long as I have had mine, they know, as a rule, how to wash them. Old Mrs. Gregor, I hear,

was in the front row the first evening, learning how to breathe.'

'I see your aunt is still as set as ever on your marrying Mr. Safford,' said Mrs. Paton, when they had left the village behind them, and were driving along the elm-bordered country roads; 'but don't you be driven into it. I never heard of anything so absolutely unsuitable! Let the Williams girls in the pink frocks make him happy.'

'I often wonder what will become of me,' said the girl, looking with her earnest eyes into the blonde face opposite.

'Ah! I wonder,' thought Mrs. Paton.

There was something about this young woman which suggested to her mind that a sequel of a commonplace order was an impossibility, but that something unforeseen was to be expected—from what quarter she was too lazy to inquire. She was only dimly aware of it, as one walking by the sea might catch the dull, confused noises heralding a storm, or hear the beginning of a ground-swell.

'Look here, child,' said Mrs. Paton suddenly, and speaking with so much conviction that Asta looked at her half-startled. 'You will have someone to love you—believe me, you will—so don't be forced to do what you don't want. When a man loves you, he'll love you very much indeed. You see so few men here, and your circumstances are against you; circumstances and opportunities do not make love, but they make marriage. Do you think that even half of these marriages you see have been inspired by

love? No, no. By business reasons, social reasons, and, in a place like this, by the fact that they see no one but each other, but by love, no. Nevertheless, love is the best thing in the world, Asta, and that you will have; out there in the world are men who will love you.'

Mrs. Paton stopped the pony at a shop in the High Street, and while she went in Asta held the reins. It was not market-day, yet an unwonted stir was in the town, and the irregular, old-fashioned street was unusually full of people; they were waiting about in knots and looking towards the end of the street by the Fair Meadow. The girl felt a dreamy enjoyment of the gaiety and movement after the quiet village she had left, but, lost in a dream, was not thinking distinctly of her surroundings.

'How nice,' she was reflecting, 'if we had a pony-carriage, and I could drive into the town with poor papa! I would try and help him to get his work done early, and we could get out and have our dinner in the woods, or come here and see the people and these pretty shops.'

A man in a patrol jacket was leaving the Star at this moment, and came sauntering up the street; his eyes were caught by the scarlet of Asta's flowers, and he bent his military-peaked cap to look at her. In another moment he had crossed the road and was speaking to her.

'I was thinking about you to-day,' he said. 'I have just posted that dance invitation to you; and what are you doing here alone—with your scarlet

flowers?' He said the last words in an undertone, and half-shutting his bright blue eyes to look at her.

'I am not alone. Mrs. Paton is here; she is in that shop.'

'Is she? Do you know that Benham's Circus is in the town, and that it is just going round in procession? You should come up into some window to see it. Where is Mrs. Paton? I'll ask her.'

As he spoke, he was examining the eyes under the vivid hat to see what they said to him to-day. He did not appear to remember that her hand still lay in his, till now, with another pressure of the fingers, he laid it in her lap and looked at his watch.

'I'll go in and ask Mrs. Paton. The thing will start in another minute; would you care to see it?' he asked again, consulting her dark eyes. 'Let us see it together.'

There was a subtle suggestion of intimacy in Skene's last words.

'Yes, ask her,' said the girl, and in her words also there was the remembrance of something that had gone before.

As the scent of a flower clings to the air which it has breathed, so there seemed about this encounter the fine perfume of a passion which, though never spoken, had filled their hearts that evening in the garden. Once more Asta was walking there; the tall privet-hedges began to throw their shadows; once more the larkspurs and campanulas brushed

her skirts ; the fantastic yews, shaped like peacocks, massed their forms against the sky ; far away, Bluebell Hill was beginning to lose its blue shadows, and to put on over all a mantle of dim violet. The crowded High Street, which had at first pleased her, seemed now far away ; again they walked, again they parted.

Colonel Skene was coming out of the shop with Mrs. Paton.

'I'll bring the pony into the Star and we can watch the procession from the windows of the hotel,' he was saying.

When they found themselves in the window overlooking the street, the procession had already started. Ladies and knights were riding past, and Skene watched Asta's enjoyment with some amusement. Cream-coloured ponies whose embroidered saddle - cloths threw up a trembling sheen of mother-of-pearl, elephants on whose howdahs sat turbaned Mahouts—all these, in turn, passed in review.

Suddenly Asta leaned far out of the window, gazing intently at something or someone. Beneath them was a chariot of scarlet and gold, bearing what appeared to be a masque of all nations. Turks, Chinamen and Japanese were there, while the six piebalds, to the intense enjoyment of the crowd, were driven by a Red Indian with scarlet and yellow cheeks. Seated among these was a Negress ; dressed in scarlet and with a fillet of gold in her wool, she looked about her on the crowd as she went with a

smile of perfect happiness, and carried on the while a lively conversation with two lean-looking Blacks, sketchily dressed, who were squatting at her feet. In the centre of the chariot was a cage containing a lion.

‘Judith, Judith!’ cried Asta, leaning out and waving a hand. ‘Judith!’

The woman saw her young mistress, and paused in her conversation with the men to nod and smile delightedly back, but there was no trace of embarrassment in her manner.

‘Oh, Mrs. Paton, look! Judith has got into the show! How nice for her! She is actually in that chariot!’

‘What! your old nurse that you told me about?’ exclaimed Skene. ‘Is that your nurse, the lady with the smile and the spangles?’ He was looking at Asta now with some astonishment.

‘Oh, how she must be enjoying herself!’ exclaimed Asta. ‘What fun for her!’

‘I advise her not to let your aunt know,’ said Mrs. Paton.

‘Isn’t she rather unconventional to be a young girl’s duenna?’ asked Skene in an undertone of Mrs. Paton.

Mrs. Paton shrugged her shoulders.

‘Mrs. Case tells me she can’t get rid of her. I believe there’s no actual harm in the woman, and she is devoted to Miss Steele.’

‘I expect she knew some of the company’ (Asta was speaking now). ‘Perhaps some of those coloured

people are her brothers ; perhaps they come from St. Lucia ; but I wonder she isn't afraid of sitting so close to that lion.'

' I think the brothers look more awful than the lion,' said Mrs. Paton.

A brass band in a gilt chariot now burst into a noisy march, and to this accompaniment the carriage bearing Judith rolled and lurched up the High Street.

' Now you've seen Judith,' said Asta.

' Yes, now I've seen her,' responded Skene.

He was looking at Asta now from another point of view. The sight of this barbaric retainer of hers, clothed in lurid scarlet and sitting down with these Savages, had thrown round Asta herself, more strongly than ever, that sensation of something old-world and unknown which had always been with him in regarding her. Once more he recalled the dancing girl at Port Said—her arms, her postures, her gliding movements, the stamp and wriggle of her brown, slim feet ; and the blare of the band seemed to cry in his ears like the beating of tomtoms and the shrieking of pipes. Again he saw all the seduction, all the allurement, all the mystery of past loves, of dead years, looking out of Asta's eyes. Yes, everything was a part of something that had once lived ; the tears of the dead, dark people, her ancestors, had given this exquisite sorrow to her eyes ; their smiles of gladness had shaped her lips. They had handed down the flesh that now ensnared his eye, the voice that was so unlike that of his own

women ; the air, now melancholy, now wild, that was so alluring to him, and that almost, but not quite, held his careless soul and fancy. With these eyes, sad as the grave, these lips, tender and passionate as a first kiss, dead women had spoken with caresses to their lovers under tropical suns. Yes, everything was a part of what had once lived and hated, striven, loved and died ; and far away in a land of heat, of languor and of careless enterprise, had been the beginning of Asta Steele.

She was leaning far out of the window and waving a cotton-gloved hand to her nurse.

‘Would you rather be with her?’ asked Skene with a half-jealousy, and leaning closely beside her on the window-sill. ‘Would you? Tell me.’

‘Do you ask me that?’ answered she. ‘You know I would not.’

In the breast-pocket of Skene’s military jacket were some letters from a woman; as he leant forward he could hear the papers give a crackle; a very slight frown passed over his brown face.

‘Upon my word, Asta,’ observed Mrs. Paton, ‘this woman of yours is too impudent. I don’t know, really, whether I oughtn’t to tell your aunt.’

‘Oh, do not.’

‘You needn’t fear, child; it would be my duty, and I never do my duty. Only, Asta, you must yourself give her a good scolding; ask her what on earth she meant.’

‘It would do no good; besides, I know what she meant: she meant to be happy, and when a person

is not happy and then she gets a chance like that, surely she must take it. She is happy.' She said the last words with a little sigh.

'And the two gentlemen at her feet were happy,' observed Colonel Skene; 'the lion was the only check on the gaiety; he looked as if he had died in a fit of the blues and had been stuffed.'

"When a person is not happy," indeed!" quoted Mrs. Paton. 'Then I suppose it is sheer accident that you are not following up the procession with another cage of wild beasts? Come now, child,' consulting a little blue, be-diamonded watch, 'we must go. I wonder how poor Bullfinch is; find him for us, Colonel Skene. Even in the inner fastnesses of the hotel yard he has probably smelt the elephants and things and is terrified.'

When Colonel Skene had said good-bye, he watched the pony-carriage till it was out of sight.

'She is like a foreign flower,' he said.

CHAPTER XI

THROUGH country roads bordered by elms, and by woods and meadows giving out the exquisite night-scent of flowers and grasses, rolled the conveyance carrying the Steeles. The day had been hot and thundery, there was a feeling of oppression in the air. Seen against the sky, the leaves scarcely moved, but hung like a dark, perforated screen before the heavens. Inanimate objects had an air of suspense and waiting ; far away were dimly to be seen one or two lights, indicating the distant parish of Whestead.

The vehicle they had hired from the inn of Borth was of the old-fashioned make called ‘sociable’ ; it was seldom in requisition, and its cloth cushions smelt fusty. Its lights, mingling with the dim moonlight, lit up the interior, and showed the Vicar of Borth and his daughter. Asta’s dark eyes and hair appeared from the wrappings of a white shawl with which Judith had enveloped her ; but there was no need for the shawl, and it had only been added to her dress by the faithful woman because she thought it the right thing with evening dress. Asta felt hot, and the shawl crushed her dress and flowers. In her black hair the negress had fastened a mass of

stephanotis; in the dusky interior of the carriage the flowers appeared like a large spot of white; their pungent aroma filled the air.

'Are you feeling better, papa?' asked the girl, slipping her hand into Mr. Steele's.

The Vicar unclosed his eyes, which had been shut.

'I am feeling much better, my dear,' said he. 'I am sorry you noticed my not being well; it is only a slight cold—indeed, only that stupid hay-fever—nothing more serious, I assure you, and I don't want it to prevent you from having an enjoyable evening; indeed, it certainly won't keep me from enjoying myself. I intend that we shall both have a thoroughly good time, Asta.'

'Yes, dear, and it isn't as if it were a cold evening, is it? People don't get serious colds in summer weather, do they, even if their lungs are weak?'

'No, no. Serious colds? Nonsense!'

'So that there is no risk, dear love, is there, for you?'

'Good gracious me, child, no!' said Mr. Steele, turning his always curiously-pallid face on his daughter with a half-surprise.

'Only that you are coming out to-night for my sake, and—'

'Tut—not a bit! Goodness me, how this thing jolts! This is Turrell's Lane—a scandal really to the neighbourhood. I'm going in the first place for you, but I have every intention of having a happy evening myself.'

'I know *I* shall,' said the child, nodding her head, and making the white flowers in her hair tremble.

'As for my feeling a little run down,' continued the Vicar, 'I always get like this at this time of year; but the first glass of champagne the Colonel offers me will pull me together and start me afresh, you'll see.'

'Yes, won't it? I wonder what the ball will be like. There's one thing—it's sure to be nice, for Colonel Skene is so kind and pleasant.'

'To be sure, my dear. And we shall be breaking new ground and seeing fresh people—that's also pleasant. Not, dear, that I don't like Borth, but I have always liked soldiers, as you know; my happiest days were spent with them. Moreover, the Borth and Maidstone people are a jog-trot set, stiff and ceremonious. Look at the Williamses, for instance. I don't know what it is, but they are not hearty, somehow.'

The piteously puzzled look that Mr. Steele always wore when considering the aspect towards himself of Society drifted over his face, and a curious expression came into Asta's eyes.

'The Williamses are cruel and bad, papa,' she muttered. 'They are not Christians. Do not speak of them.'

'Now, now, Asta, you go too far. Do not lightly deprive anyone of the sacred title of Christian. They are mistaken, doubtless—their lamp has gone out; but to assert that they have no right to the title of

Christian means that they can never light it again.
“Judge not, that ye be not judged.””

‘I do not care whether they light up again or not,’ Asta observed with sulky contempt.

‘You may not, my child,’ rejoined Mr. Steele, ‘but their heavenly Father does. Their heavenly Father loves them, remember, with a love passing all understanding.’

A look of faint surprise came on the girl’s face.

‘I think, do you know, papa, you must be mistaken,’ said she. ‘Are you sure that He loves the Williams family? Why should He? And, besides, if He loves people who are so very, very nasty, why be good? Are you quite, quite certain, dear?’

A pained look crossed the pallor of the Vicar’s dark face.

‘My dear,’ said he, ‘you came too late on religion; you have not assimilated it, and it is really grievous to hear you speak of it. Those who have been born in the fold, and have heard from infancy the teachings of Christianity, never swerve from their beliefs, and they are, as it were, born with a knowledge of these very facts which surprise you and which you doubt, and yet all that is required is implicit belief. To us shepherds is given the task of leading our sheep: to them the lot of blindly and reverentially following. There should be no words with a sheep, much less argument, and a sheep——’

‘It is all very strange,’ interrupted Asta, moving to sit by the open window of the vehicle, where the wind blew the white flowers in her dusky hair. ‘I

don't think I ever heard such extraordinary things before; I don't expect I shall ever quite understand them. But the queerest thing of all is about what happens when we die. Now, how about Aunt Melanie and Aunt Julia—are they gone up too ?'

In the dusky recesses of the 'sociable' a harassed expression passed over the Vicar's face.

'Gone up where?' he asked.

'To heaven, papa. I mean, have they got there in spite of not being Church of England?'

'They are most undoubtedly there at this moment.'

'And the Williamses, and young Terrence?' continued his daughter, with intense interest. They are *going*, you say; they'll go up when they die?'

'I trust so,' said Mr. Steele, with some slight irritation—'I trust so, as a minister of the Church. But pray, Asta, get out of that way of speaking of the Ascension of the Just as if they were so many balloons.'

Leaning slightly forward and gazing into the heavens, Asta regarded the future home of the Misses Williams. Then she said:—

'Then, I wonder, if you can really get into heaven by being a Catholic as well as by being what you taught me to be, that everyone isn't a Catholic instead. There is such lovely singing, and it smells so nice!'

Mr. Steele made no response to this suggestion, and presently she observed:—

'Chinese and Indians will be there too, then, I dare say, if the sort of religion you believe in doesn't

matter. They certainly will be if the Williams girls and Mr. Terrence are going—in fact, everyone will be there.'

The Vicar had been leaning back with tired, closed eyes, and now, opening them wearily, said :—

' My dear, I think I will sleep awhile, if you will permit me.'

When the carriage entered the town of Chatham Mr. Steele was still lying back resting, and by the uncertain light cast by the carriage-lamps and the murky light of the heavens his daughter regarded him anxiously. The lights in the sordid streets they were traversing cast alternate glares and fantastic shadows into the interior of the carriage. Once, the flash of incandescent gas-jets over the entrance to a music-hall gave for an instant a hideous green pallor to Mr. Steele's features. His daughter started momentarily, and he awoke.

' Where are we, my dear? I've been quite drowsy. We're not far off the barracks, now; I feel rested.' But he did not appear to be rested.

' You look cold, papa,' murmured Asta; ' the evening seems to have turned chilly and damp, and you have no overcoat.'

' I should think not, on a night like this. This is summer, remember!'

' But the English summer nights are so queer; they are not dry coolness like St. Lucia, and we are not like the English, you and I, and we are not used to them.'

' Not like the English, you and I, Asta!' said the

Vicar, now thoroughly aroused and awake, and speaking with a pathetic displeasure. ‘Not like the English! but we *are* English; pray what else do you consider us? I am as English as anyone can be!’

‘I do not think you are,’ cried Asta, speaking with the click. ‘Neither you nor I are of these people, we are aliens. Is it possible that you do not feel it? The people feel we are different, too, and they do not like us for it. Look at us; are we just like the English? No, we are not, and I am glad of it. I would not like to be like them. They are cold, they can neither love nor hate; and, papa, I am sure that when God comes to sort out your parishioners in particular and sees what a——’

But the carriage had come to a standstill behind a long queue of other vehicles, and, Asta stopping short, the Vicar was pleased to lose the end of the sentence.

But the momentary annoyance, that annoyance which always passed over Asta’s soul when she thought of the English life which had from the first been so uncongenial to her, was gone, wiped out by the certainty of present happiness. Her gleaming eyes searched the line of carriages ahead of them to see how many had still to put down their occupants before she and her father could alight.

Eight carriages still! She withdrew her dark head from the night into which she had been gazing. She had no idea of taking care of anything. In looking out of the window and in leaning back throughout the journey, she had often pressed the

stephanotis in her hair against the sides of the vehicle as she reflected on the coming delights of the evening. Blown by the summer wind, some of its waxen blossoms had fallen, some lay crushed in her hair, giving out their strong hothouse scent; the flowers were broken and disarranged, and presented a disorderly appearance.

Mr. Steele waited outside while Asta went into the cloak-room.

Judith's parting words had been that she would be the belle of the ball, but the poor, shabby little red dress had become very limp and draggled during the drive.

The dressing-room was full of ladies; all looked fresh and some were very smart; their skirts rustled, their long gloves were nicely adjusted, and the young girls' dresses looked new and crisp, and were cut in correct style to show just the right amount of their white throats and no more. A row of pearls, or some trifling ornament in turquoises or pearls, hung at their necks, giving an air of delicacy and refinement to their virginal appearance; their little short sleeves, composed of a fluff of tulle or of lace, partly veiled the pink, mottled tops of their arms. They prattled to each other as they arranged the ribbons and flowers on each others' shoulders with an air of intimacy.

A plump girl in a blue dress stood a long while before the glass, rearranging some lace on her bodice, and Asta stood by, wondering what fault she

could find with such a lovely dress, and what she should look like herself when, in turn, she saw herself in that glass. The girl moved away, muttering that the lace made her shoulders too square.

As Asta was about to move towards the mirror, a lady entered with a rustle and frou-frou of silken petticoats. She was very wonderfully dressed, Asta thought: her bodice was of some flesh-pink material, the skirt composed of pink frills, with pearl pendants hanging in between, which swung together and made a little sound as she walked. She had taken off a very exquisite cloak of white lace and sable-tail. Her dress was cut very low, so low that Asta gazed on it astonished; she took from her pocket a tiny porcelain box, and, taking from it a black velvet patch, proceeded to fix it on her bosom.

A lady who had entered with her watched her reflection in the glass, and then Asta heard her observe in an undertone, and with a little laugh:—

‘I should have thought that, in your line of business, Freda, those patches were very awkward wear. I should have thought that, after that unfortunate incident of Major Frere coming back with one of them attached to his moustache, you would have discarded them.’

At this both ladies laughed, but the pink lady had now produced a tiny instrument with an ivory handle and was rubbing her face industriously with it. Asta thought that she did not look either pretty or nice; she appeared old, and when she spoke, it was apparent that a gold wire fastened in false teeth at

the side, but she had beautiful eyes and a very small waist. She did not reply at once to her companion's speech—she was too busy; but, having given one last searching look in the mirror, she made, in French, what was evidently a comment on it, and taking her arm, they rustled together out of the room and disappeared.

And then, at last, Asta's anxious burning eyes searched the mirror for her own reflection.

Yes, the eyes, those beautiful eyes which nothing could dim, were there, but she was not looking at all like the lovely lady in the picture. She was too ignorant of the world and of fashion to know in what her appearance was wrong, though she felt the difference between her tumbled little, dowdy red frock and the white dresses of the others.

She was leaving the room when one of the attendants said, addressing Asta, but with a smile at her fellow-servant :—

'A piece of your silk lacing is out; shall I tuck it in?'

There was a certain familiarity of insolence in the tone which Asta noticed at once; in addressing her the maid had used no title of respect. She glanced at the woman keenly and left the room.

Outside, her father was awaiting her, and they walked together to the mess-room. People looked twice at the Vicar's dark face and at the little figure beside him in the red dress. There was something bizarre in the appearance of the couple. Just before them in the crowd, making towards the dancing-

room, were the pink lady and her companion. To Asta's mind, absolutely untainted by society lies, absolutely truthful with the clear-sighted truthfulness of a child, this lady was an astonishing being, and appeared exactly the class of woman she really was: the cut of her bodice, her manner, the loose conversation between her and her companion, the patch set low on her bosom, would, indeed, have informed an Ojibbeway of the character of the lady's mind and morals.

Yet it was evident that society did not take this view of her. This dress, then, and these manners, though they appeared indecent, must be all right. If they had been condemned, would these people—some of them old ladies and, doubtless, judges of propriety—have greeted her so pleasantly and warmly? Again the child was unable to reconcile what she saw practised with the teachings of this, to her, new world. Yes, it was very odd why these people should take the trouble to profess something they evidently never practised, and should sit in their cold churches, promising God what they had obviously no intention of performing.

But she only took in with half her mind the swaying slim shoulders above the pink bodice: she was too much occupied with thoughts of the coming meeting with Colonel Skene.

If she had been less excited, she would almost certainly have asked the Vicar some of those terribly earnest, primeval questions as to these people—those searching questions which, as he said, were

the result of a half-known, half-assimilated religion, and very trying to answer. The poor Vicar had no greater trial than these problems of his daughter, and her wonder at the world; for, through some idiosyncrasy of hers, no teachings, he well knew, had ever been received in a wholly satisfactory manner.

The Vicar had pulled himself together and offered Asta his arm; his face looked worn through its darkness, and the child gazed at it keenly and sorrowfully. No, it was impossible that she could enjoy the evening at all if poor papa was not to enjoy it too; and he had come for her sake; he had not been well when he started; a cold feeling flitted into her being. Poor papa ill! Better far she should never see this handsome man again than let papa suffer! What was he, after all? A charming moth that had fluttered into her path that summer night a fortnight ago, just as the beautiful moths did at St. Lucia in those old happy twilights on the balcony; but, though she did not know it, he was a great deal more than this.

The man's happy, sunburnt face, with its air of another world than hers, with its suggestion of absolute well-being, was a mask, behind which had gleamed to the poor child the only unalloyed happiness she had tasted since she had come to Borth.

The lady in pink was before them in the ball-room, and a number of men surrounded her and her

companion ; her slim shoulders were turned to the entrance. Then Asta saw that Colonel Skene was talking to her ; she had given her programme to him, and he was writing his name in a great many places.

CHAPTER XII

COLONEL SKENE, after scribbling his signatures on the lady's programme, handed it back to her and then looked with his keen blue eyes towards the door.

He saw there a little brown-faced girl in a very ugly red dress. Flowers were in the ill-dressed hair, but the flowers were faded. On the bodice Judith, to impart an air of freshness to its shabbiness, had fastened one of those elaborately-made mats of blossoms which were once the fashion, but have long since been vulgarized. A small opening showed a piece of Asta's neck, bound by a velvet band from which depended a steel cross—the only trinket the child possessed.

Colonel Skene had the fondness of a man of the world for smartness, or, failing that, for at least that safe conventionality of attire which escapes without comment.

'Confound it all!' said he to himself. 'Poor little creature! what a guy she has turned herself out!'

But no one could have guessed his thoughts from his manner.

'How do you do?' said he, approaching the couple smilingly.

The Vicar's dark face brightened up at seeing

his host, and he returned the Colonel's hand-shake warmly.

'I am not so very well this evening,' he returned, replying to the Colonel's speech as if he had literally meant an inquiry into the state of his health—'very, very poorly, in fact, but it is only the time of year—nothing to worry about.'

Colonel Skene listened very politely to Mr. Steele, but there was nothing in his debonair, red-brown face and bright, wide-aware eyes to indicate that he was likely to harass himself with anxiety about anyone's health.

Again Asta was struck by the charming air of well-being and joy of life that showed in every expression and in every movement.

As Mr. Steele was speaking, Colonel Skene was looking at Asta.

'Her eyes are exquisite, but how the devil does she come looking like this?' he was thinking; 'and how can I get any men to dance with her in this common get-up, and with that awful bunch of crushed flowers in her hair?'

But Asta, looking in his face, did not know of what he was thinking; his eyes rested on her, she thought, with the same tender expression which she remembered, and she forgot all else. The world was kind to pretty women, he himself had said so; and she was the same woman that he had then admired—she had not changed.

As Colonel Skene stood before her, speaking, she

heard the tinkle of the pearl fringes on the pink gown ; their wearer was passing with a partner. The perfume on her skirts, partly musk, partly heliotrope, once more gave Asta that sensation of something before unknown. No one had begun to dance, but laying a hand on her partner's arm, the owner of the pearls glided into the centre of the room, the pendants on her dress swinging together with a little rattling sound as she swayed.

'Who is that lady ?' asked Asta of Colonel Skene.

A shade of deeper red came over Colonel Skene's features.

'It is Mrs. Donnithorne,' he replied. 'Now, why the deuce does the girl ask that?' he reflected, and he glanced keenly at her.

"Mrs.!" echoed Asta, in a tone of surprise.

'Certainly "Mrs."—Why?' he added.

But even Asta's frankness was unequal to explaining to her host why she was surprised at hearing that the lady was a married woman.

'I must try and get some boys to come and dance with Miss Steele,' Colonel Skene was thinking. 'Confound people coming looking like this! Such a nice, dear little creature, too—a sweet little girl. No one will want to. Young Saunders—I *might*, perhaps—— I must get you some partners,' he observed aloud. 'Shall I find you here?'

As Colonel Skene went off in search of officers of a sufficiently amiable temperament to consent to dance with a very young and ill-dressed stranger, he felt an ill-used man. He was very even-tempered and good-

natured, but everything had gone wrong this evening. In the first place, a note received from Freda Donnithorne that morning had told him that she was coming with the Wiltshires to-night, and Freda always disturbed him. Freda always—well, never mind—he would rather not have had her there to-night. She had come with the Wiltshires, bringing her husband and Shorthouse. Now, why the devil bring Shorthouse? Obviously to pique him, Skene. Well, it didn't matter much, of course; he didn't care for her now; but, all the same, bringing Short-house was making him ridiculous. It was, moreover, stupid, like a great many things this clever woman did. For she *was* clever; if she had not been, he could never have cared for her; he hated the foolish and common-place. This odd little, darkie parson's daughter with the eyes was not like anyone he had met before.

Ah! There again he had taken a fancy—more than a fancy—for this odd, charming child, and—confound it all!—instead of getting into a decent frock of sane build, she had arrived looking like the ornament off a Twelfth-Night cake. He foresaw Mrs. Donnithorne's chaff on the subject when she should see them dancing together; but what was that, compared to the difficulty in securing partners for the extraordinary little person whom his charming friend of the garden-party now appeared to be? . . . Dances were a nuisance—this should be his last. . . .

The General was here to-night, and therefore they all wore jackets fastened to the neck; this would

make an additional difficulty in getting partners, for under the circumstances dancing in this hot weather was an infliction not to be lightly undergone. And the girl had told him how fond she was of dancing; it was altogether frightfully awkward. As he wandered about the crowded room, his clear blue eyes searched for likely men for Miss Steele.

'Look here, Scrope and Lavender,' said he, addressing a young Marine with fuzzy light hair, and a young civilian who were standing talking to another youth,—'have you boys got any dances left? I want to introduce you to a lady;' and in another minute he had presented them to Asta Steele. . . .

'What a strange young thing!' said one to the other when they had left the Colonel and were out of ear-shot. 'Is she Colonel Skene's guest?'

'She is draped precisely like my sister's dressing-table,' returned the Marine. 'God knows whose guest she is! The awful fact remains that we've got to dance with her. Now, if it had been Mrs. Donnithorne!'

Yes, if it had been Mrs. Donnithorne, both agreed that their position would have been desirable indeed. She was flitting by at that moment; they looked at her skirts on which the pearls tinkled, and then at her square expanse of whitened back.

Neither of the young men had had an introduction, and a red-faced man in Carabineers' uniform, who was dancing with her, was an object of envy.

'Who is the fellow she's dancing with now?'

'Barton of the Army Service.'

'Then why the deuce does he wear a Carabineer uniform?'

'Was once in the Carabineers, and thinks he looks pretty in the uniform, I suppose.'

A young man with a narrow, dark face was standing by, watching the dancers with an imperturbable air. This was young Felton, the son of a rich brewer in Maidstone, whose people entertained the regiment a good deal.

'Colonel Skene has just let us in for such a crock,' said one of the couple, addressing this youth.

'Do you mean the lady with all that faded vegetation on her chest?' asked young Felton, following the direction of their glances. Then he added: 'You have my sympathy. How did such a thing befall you? I never dance with girls, pretty or ugly. This one, by the way, is devilish pretty if she hadn't that dress. Got one or two with Mrs. Donnithorne, Mrs. Bright, and Mrs. Wiltshire; pass all the rest—too much fag!'

This sentiment was received in sympathetic and approving silence. Then, as presently the pearl ornamented dress passed by them in the dance, the young Marine observed:—

'Colonel Skene, they say, has ceased to be the third partner there. The firm is now Donnithorne, Donnithorne and Shorthouse.'

'What! Only three?' said young Felton. 'I should have thought in that particular firm there would at any time always have been enough to form

a limited company.' Then, after a little pause to allow this exquisite sentence to sink into the systems of his audience, he observed :—' But, after all, you know, Mrs. Donnithorne has overdone it a bit lately, and I think the dear British matron's back is up. That last business with Skene was a little too much in evidence. They say she is not now asked to any functions at the General's, and, if so, it will about settle her.'

The young man looked about him calmly and pleasantly as he spoke. Then he said :

' It isn't morals on the part of the old crocks of the district, but merely an upheaval of their damned primeval instinct for destruction. You can see the same any day among wolves and tigers at the Zoo. They will always fall on a disabled animal who, barring his wound, is precisely the same animal he was before. Mrs. Donny is precisely the same tiger she was before, and a very amusing one, too, which makes it the greater pity.'

Standing together in a little circle, and lowering their voices when the arms and silken skirts of ladies were pressed against them in the crowd, the young men, with a want of reticence in exact proportion to their age, talked the current scandal of the garrison. With a good-natured vagueness, born of champagne and of their naturally amiable dispositions, they deplored the censoriousness of the world.

Yes, hang it all ! it was an awful shame when people were so down on other people, especially nice women like Mrs. Donnithorne. All agreed that she

was 'very nice.' Young Felton particularly, in the same breath in which he had reflected on the lady's reputation, regretted the harsh criticisms of Society in general, and again compared the respectable matrons of the garrison to the occupants of a menagerie. This figure of speech appeared to afford him considerable satisfaction, and was much admired by the rest of the little party.

Some five minutes afterwards the envious eyes of the boys saw Mr. Felton waltzing with Mrs. Donnithorne.

'Awfully decent chap, old Felton!' they agreed.

CHAPTER XIII

MEANWHILE Asta Steele was standing about with her father, looking on. It was the fourth waltz, and she had not danced at all. At last, tired of standing, they had found seats; but it was less interesting still to sit down, for a number of people were grouped before them, and Asta's burning eyes had long ago admired every uniform and brightly-coloured dress in the room, so that to sit hemmed in with uniforms and satin skirts was extremely dull. And she had no name on her programme before Colonel Skene's dance at seven.

A curious expression had come into the girl's face —a look of anxiety and bewilderment, almost of dismay. The time had seemed very long, and though Colonel Skene had come up to her once in the interval and very tenderly deplored the fate which, by forcing him to attend to other guests, was keeping them apart, his words had only temporarily lightened the sadness of her face, and had not at all lessened the depression of the Vicar.

When Colonel Skene had last come to her with his apology, she had tried to nerve herself to ask him to offer her father some champagne; but just as she was about to make the uncomfortable and, for a guest, extremely unconventional suggestion

that their host should look to his guest's refreshment, someone had begun speaking to Colonel Skene, and he had been forced to leave her.

Now Mr. Steele sat there, looking ill and neglected; but to all his daughter's suggestions that he should go out and help himself, he obstinately replied that he would wait till his host asked him.

From time to time she glanced at the worn-looking face beside her. A grieved and angry look had settled on it as he sat there surrounded by ball-dresses and uniforms. As usual, he did not know why he was treated differently from others; and also, being absolutely out of Society, he did not understand the new, smart methods. It was not bad treatment from a Society point of view to leave them there alone; on the contrary, it was rather smart to assume that he and his daughter had friends, and to act on that assumption. But the unfortunate Vicar, never having enjoyed the privilege of the friendship of the smart, was unable to gauge justly the Colonel's conduct.

He had taken a red silk handkerchief from his breast-pocket, and, having made it into a firm mop, was now at intervals wiping his temples and dabbing them in a restless way peculiar to him when more than usually worried. Asta recognised the action. Thus he had wiped his brow when the Band of Hope, personally conducted by himself into the country, had got loose in Colonel Brand's orchard, and the Colonel himself, disturbed in an afternoon nap, had reviled him over the hedge; and thus he had behaved

when he read that horrible letter from the Bishop—a hateful person, the Bishop, Asta had felt at the time.

‘People appear to have strange ideas of hospitality,’ said Mr. Steele presently, speaking with a slight lisp on the ‘s’ in hospitality. ‘I wonder why, with such numbers of young men at his command, he doesn’t introduce anyone to you.’

‘I do not know, papa,’ replied the child, in a depressed voice.

‘Awhile ago, Asta,’ continued the Vicar fretfully, ‘I saw a young, light-haired Marine officer and two other exceedingly nice youths pointing out you—and, indeed, without vanity, I dare say, myself—to a fourth, and all looked to me to be exceedingly solicitous for an introduction to us; but’—shrugging his shoulders—‘there was no one in this strangely-conducted ball-room to act as M.C., and the boys, timid as boys always are, had, doubtless, to renounce the wish. It was the same at the Dalmers’ tennis-party. There was young Terrence, a pleasant youth—yes, Asta, I know you don’t like him, but I am sure he admires you—and I am certain if only someone had taken the initiative, he was longing to be friendly with us, and to talk to you and make a four with you; but there is never anyone to make things easy and jolly—there is really a strange want of heartiness about.’

It was characteristic of the Vicar that, unless slights were impossible to be misunderstood, he never saw them, and even when they had been

borne in on him, he forgot them almost immediately. As a rule, this annoyed his daughter, but now, seeing the forlorn figure sitting beside her, she was thankful for such an attitude of mind.

‘It is a long way,’ said the Vicar, giving a final wipe to his brow, and then sitting with the handkerchief in his hand ready for further use—‘it is a long way to come for this sort of thing.’

His daughter remained silent. The little tinkle of the pink woman’s pearls sounded in her ears and gave her a sense of excitement in which she was not able to think very distinctly. She only knew that something had occurred to make her infinitely unhappy. Yes, and she had meant to be so very happy this evening, just as God had allowed her to be at that garden-party. She had said her prayers religiously ever since that delightful day, had pointed out to the Almighty the date of this dance, and had entreated Him for just this one night’s pleasure.

Every day since, she had gone into the church and prayed; on several occasions Judith had accompanied her to help. Even when the church had been closed she had begged the key from her father, and, unlocking the door, had entered to make her supplication. In the east was a stained-glass window with a representation of the Saviour and Mary Magdalene. It was to this pictured Christ that she offered her prayers, seeing a Divine kindness and mercy on His face and in His attitude towards the poor woman whose golden hair fell over His feet. Yester-

day she had gathered some white flowers and had laid them before Him. . . .

And now she was wretched. A sensation of grief to come oppressed her. Every time that Colonel Skene passed in the dance with Mrs. Donnithorne's whitened arm lying on his sleeve she suffered. . . .

But the passion she had felt for him that summer-scented evening among the lilies and roses was gone. As she sat there, thinking, that element of savagery in her nature which had been handed down to her from those dead-and-gone ancestors of hers, and which was never very far below the surface, was stirring in her; it showed in her dilated nostrils, in the expression of her eyes. He had told her lies. Had he not said he loved her?—Not perhaps in so many words, but with that clever tongue of his he had conveyed it to her in a hundred ways, with a hundred looks and signs, and in tenderly-spoken, subtle words, in sentences the child had not heard the like of before.

She sat there thinking all this out, and, as she sat, she seemed to herself to be digging a hole in the darkness, somewhere out of sight, to bury every happy thought of Colonel Skene.

With a few frantic scrapes of the violin, a few extra whirls from the dancers, the waltz ended; the couples ceased dancing, and gradually the room emptied. The pearls rustled and murmured close by, as Colonel Skene and their wearer disappeared

into a draped alcove. Asta saw her host's gloved hand drawing the curtain closer. . . .

Then, like the wash-back of waves into the sea, the dancers had gone, leaving behind them the dowagers, one or two elderly men, and the girls who had failed to get partners, and who remained now like the drift-wood stranded on a beach.

Seated beside their chaperons, they looked about them sadly. Asta's dark eyes rested on them, divining the misery of a situation which was in fact a barbarism, a remnant of savagery, these rows of virgins waiting, like cabs, to be hired. . . .

The bandsmen had taken up their instruments again. Several of the couples had begun to saunter back into the ball-room. . . .

Colonel Skene was before her; she was to dance with him. She rose, and Mr. Steele awakened from a bored reverie, in which his eyes had been resting on the back of a vivacious young woman who, seated close by, had been defining love to a young engineer officer.

'All right, my dear—all right,' he said, with an attempt at cheerfulness.

He did not understand in the least why Asta should have been neglected for so long, but he was relieved to see that she was at last going to dance.

'Your father doesn't look well to-night,' observed Colonel Skene as he conducted her through the room.

'He doesn't,' replied Asta, with trembling lips, and that cold feeling at the heart which always

followed any allusion to her father's ill-health ; but she said no more. It was impossible for her to speak on such a subject ; something caught her throat.

'All her freshness seems to have gone to-night,' Colonel Skene was thinking ; 'poor little girl!' For he was good-natured ; he was sorry for the shabby little dress. 'Poor little thing ! sweet little thing ! But not quite as pretty as I thought. How dark her skin looks ! That stoop spoils her too—great pity.'

He was sensible that people looked at him and at her. The idea was not pleasing to him ; he liked smart people.

'Come along, Miss Steele,' said he.

The strong arm was round her waist, and Asta was dancing for the first time that evening.

'How heavy these light, ethereal-looking girls can be !' he was reflecting, 'while you see women of twelve stone going round like feathers — gives a nervous little jump while dancing — try another step. How's that ? That's better. . . . Wonder where Freda is ? I can guess — sitting out in the ante-room with Shorthouse. Husband looks surly. Wonder if whisky, now, would — Wiltshire's business, however, to offer it, not mine. Wiltshire brought 'em here. Cursed buttoned-up coat ! D——d foolery in this weather !'

They paused for a moment, for Asta was rather giddy, and, interrupted in his chain of thought, he began fanning her with a little Japanese fan that

hung from her waist. A lock of hair had strayed down upon her forehead. The excitement of dancing had made her look pretty.

'A darling little lock of hair has come down on your forehead,' he murmured, looking into her eyes, 'and blows about like a little feather while we dance. . . . Do you want to rest now? . . . Shall we go on again?' he asked presently. 'The room is a little emptied—everyone buttoned up to the neck to-night, so they don't care for much exertion.'

Skene was thinking vividly, almost painfully. His thoughts were of the girl, but more of Mrs. Donnithorne. His bright eyes looked about him restlessly. It was not love for Freda Donnithorne that possessed him to-night, but a vexed wonder why such a woman as this should have the power to excite him, and also what was to be the end. At that moment she passed by, and the scent on her dress and hair, half musk, half heliotrope, was wafted towards him. It recalled hours when he had loved her and life had been charming; when he knew her dresses, her gloves, her jewels, marked her way of wearing her hair, her walk, the way she entered a room, the Brussels lace scarf she draped round her shoulders, and had taken the roses and diamond combs from her hair. He would like to leave the ball and take a walk in the starlight; he would like to get away out of this coil of things; he wanted to be free from this woman. To have the little foreign girl and Freda here at the same time was an impossible situation. Though he

had been so strangely attracted by the child, did he love her? Well, what did it matter? Marriage was a blunder—an impossibility.

With an effort he pulled himself together to talk to Asta.

'And now, tell me, what have you been doing since we met?' he asked tenderly.

'I don't know.'

What had she been doing? Asta asked herself. She had been helping her father, running errands, looking at the red cretonne curtains of the Vicarage windows, and praying that some day God would be good and send her happiness and life; but she didn't say all this.

'Have you been to any more tennis? No; I forgot you told me you very seldom played. By the way, I called at Mrs. Dalmer's very soon after that afternoon—on her At Home day. You were not there.'

'No; I've not been since.'

'I hoped you would have been there'—a pause—
'I hoped very much you would—I wanted to see you again.'

This was the sort of thing he had said all over the world; it meant nothing, except that he was trying to make the time pass more pleasantly than if he had talked about the weather.

'I have not been since,' replied the child, looking listlessly about her, 'because Mrs. Dalmer only asked us as she had to ask everyone. Aunt will go and leave a card; she likes straggling about over

dusty roads, leaving cards, and asking how people are. As for me, unless I love people, I do not care how they are; and when the woods are green and the garden pleasant, it is surely better to stay there.'

'Isn't that very unsociable?'

'It is not unsociable,' replied the child gravely, and regarding him with a certain sad dignity. 'If people do not care for me, I do not care for them. And people do not behave truly; they ask you to come, yet when you come you see they do not want you; then it would have been better if a person stayed at home.'

A person! Yes, Skene remembered very well this odd little, uncultivated trick she had of speaking of herself as a person; the soft, broken speech with the clip in the words robbed it of vulgarity. Did this pathetic little speech convey a reproach? He was not sure, for she had said just such things before. But he was sensible that Asta's eyes to-night had a different expression from that which they had worn when he and she walked about among the roses and larkspurs. The child then had seemed innocent as a flower herself; now she seemed to be examining his words, doubting, taking his phrases to pieces, considering, just as she had told him she considered things, to find if they were true. Now, what the deuce did women want to think for, especially this child with the wonderful eyes? Men would always do the thinking for pretty people; tiresome of women to think!

As Colonel Skene made these reflections he was looking restlessly about the room.

'I saw a fellow here just now that I wanted to introduce to you,' he remarked; 'a very amusing, nice—' (Confound him, selfish beast!—saw me looking for him, and has disappeared!) 'Ah, he has just gone!' said he aloud to the girl. 'Now, supposing we make use of this time to have something. Will you drink champagne-cup or claret-cup? Or there's some iced coffee.'

He fanned her as he chatted pleasantly about his new polo pony—grey, with a black tail—and how the little thing would rush in and enjoy the fun of the game. He laughed cheerily, but to himself he said:—'Great Scott! wish I'd got some fellows to dance with her! Selfish brutes! but partly girl's own fault.'

Then he said to her aloud:—

'I have another with you, haven't I? How is your programme getting on?'

It was a conventional speech, which, in the disturbance of his mind, he made without reflection.

Asta gazed back into the steel-blue eyes at this question. No woman had ever looked at Skene quite in this way before; there was no longer that innocent passion in this odd little girl's regard, and he did not like this expression half so well as the tender looks he had watched for as they walked among the larkspurs and roses.

Why did he ask how her programme was getting on? What could have happened in a room, full,

as he was aware, of entire strangers to her? She showed him her card, on which were scrawled the two signatures of the two men he had introduced, and two of his own.

Colonel Skene again looked restlessly about, scanning each possible dancing man with a hungry glance.

'Let me take you back to your father just for one moment,' he murmured, 'while I look up some people to introduce to you. It has been so awkward; there are so many people here to-night I must dance with; and then, as I've been saying, we are all buttoned up to the neck in our coats this evening, so a number of men who would be dancing are sitting out.'

When the wearied Vicar next woke up from his reverie, it was to see Colonel Skene depositing his daughter beside him once more. But he had almost ceased to feel surprise at the lamentable want of pleasurable incident in this evening, and, lost in a sad torpor, now made no comment beyond saying, with an attempt at cheerfulness:—

'Back again, my dear!'

A tall man, with red hair very carefully brushed, and rather pleasant eyes, was standing out, and to this friend Colonel Skene addressed himself.

'Full up, old man,' rejoined the other, placidly but cheerily, to the suggestion that he should dance with a friend of Skene's.

'What of, you old fraud?' returned Skene. 'You've not been dancing—you've been standing about, to

my certain knowledge, ever since this infernal evening began.'

'When I say "full up," I allude to my dancing engagements, and not, as you seem to suppose, to drinks,' replied the fair man; 'as for standing about, I am cooling myself for my future partners.'

'Very thoughtful of you, I'm sure. Now, look here, I want you to do something for me—I want you to dance with someone.'

'Much too hot!'

'And I would remind you of how I took that Irish girl with the flat ankles and bog-oak ornaments off *your* hands at the Curragh Militia dance when *you* were in difficulties; just think of me now, and do what you're asked.'

'Is it a girl?'

'Yes, I regret to own it is.'

'Too hot for a girl.'

'And wasn't she a girl with the flat ankles and the bog-oak orn——'

'She was, and a damned ugly one too!' assented the fair man languidly. 'You did me a good turn, I own; but I wish you'd some day cease from throwing up her accursed ankles and necklace in my teeth. From your allusion to her want of charm, I suppose you've got something equally frightful now for me?'

'Not frightful at all.'

'Well, anyhow, I'll do it. I dare do all that may become a man.'

'That's a good fellow.'

'All right; lead on, Macduff!'

'She's a very nice, charming little thing.'

'I've no doubt of it; they always are.'

'She's different—quite fresh and nice.'

'Indeed! Then, why don't you dance with her yourself?'

'My dear Cooper,' replied the other with a harassed look, 'I'm doing all I can. Surely you can see for yourself that it's pretty awkward for me to-night. You can imagine that it's rather—'

'My dear Skene, say no more. I've not been standing here all the evening for nothing. But'—as Colonel Skene began steering him through the crowd—'whither leadest thou me? You are surely not going to bestow me in all my fresh young beauty on that great girl with swansdown on her gloves? No. Well, I'm thankful for that. Reserved for worse, perhaps?'

'Cooper, will you dance two dances and try and amuse the child and help me with her? I had supper with your girl, remember.'

'A meal which I'm sure I regret from my soul. But, remember, too, that on that occasion we were in our mess-jackets, and prepared for athletics.'

'There's nothing athletic in dancing with this little thing, or in having supper with her either. She's like a bit of swansdown.'

'You have got hold of a soft, yielding nature, and are now abusing the power of a coarser disposition,' returned Major Cooper; 'and, as for supper, I am engaged for it with Mrs. Lester, a delicious person,

reminding one of partly frozen champagne—still without, but sparkling within.'

'Glad to hear that she's at least still without,' observed Colonel Skene grimly; 'very few of your little friends are.'

The dancing-room was almost empty, and sitting by the doorway were Colonel Skene's two guests. As he conducted the unwilling Major towards them, the better part of his nature was struck by a certain air of anxiety and pathos in the couple. He was sensible that they were unhappy, and that they had not been very well treated, partly by himself and partly by Fate, and that, too, for something that was assuredly not their fault. But the inferior part of Skene's nature was the more inclined to look with a slight disfavour on them because he had already treated them shabbily, and also he had the annoyance born of an evening of embarrassment.

He scarcely now thought this sulky, dark, ill-dressed child handsome, and there was something in her look when she spoke to him that made him feel ashamed. . . .

'Can you tell me,' asked Major Cooper confidentially, 'who those funny people are by the door—the elderly nigger with the bandana, and the wild-eyed child of nature with him? No one seems to know.'

'The elderly nigger is the Vicar of Borth,' returned Skene, 'and the lady is his daughter. They are my guests, and I want you to dance with the daughter.'

'I'm sure I'm sorry I spoke,' observed Cooper, but without the slightest trace of embarrassment. Then he added:—'Good Lord! this reminds me of "In Darkest Africa." Lead on, Stanley!'

Major Cooper was duly presented. He drew his heels together and bowed gravely, asking Asta for a dance.

Mr. Steele's eyes lighted up momentarily. He was fond of talking, and had had no one to speak to since he entered. He had retained his handkerchief in hand ready for use all the evening, and now, rising and putting it away in the breast-pocket of his coat, he observed, addressing Major Cooper:—

'A hot evening, is it not? Quite surprisingly warm even for the time of year.'

'It is very warm indeed.'

'I do not know,' continued the Vicar—'I do not know whether you are a host, or whether, like ourselves, you are of those who have been bidden to the feast, but do not you think a more harmonious spirit would pervade the evening were there more introducing done?'

'I beg your pardon?' murmured Cooper.

'I say that there would have been more harmony among the young people if they had been introduced. I see banks of young ladies sitting out. It is a great wrong to them, a pernicious state of things.'

'It is very wrong of them,' assented Cooper, not catching this hurried talk of the Vicar with its click, and fixing an eye-glass in his eye the better to focus the groups of young women.

'I wish I were a younger man,' continued Mr. Steele; 'but even now, at my own parish dances, I set an example that my juniors might well follow, and the consequence is those dances are a success. Now, what do you think is my secret?'

'I cannot imagine,' replied Cooper, looking bored.

'Heartiness is the secret,' responded the Vicar. 'I am hearty at my own entertainments, and I endeavour to be hearty when abroad; but one cannot be hearty quite all alone in society.'

'Quite so,' assented Major Cooper agreeably. Where had Skene found these odd people?—he was thinking. But he looked twice at Asta's eyes and understood why she was Skene's guest. There was something of the devil in the eyes of this bizarre-looking child, and he knew Skene very well indeed. Barring her ridiculous dress, she was not bad. But girls were not in his line; he liked something racier—besides, too hot. The devil in her eyes, by the way, was a very sulky one just now. Little wretch! she was angry, no doubt, because Skene didn't make love to her, and so would scarcely look at him, Cooper. However, he was to dance with her this next dance. . . .

As they waltzed she saw her father sitting there. Was it fancy, or did he not look ghastly pale? Could it be the glare of the scarlet uniforms? . . .

Major Cooper's waltzing, she found, was a very curious performance; it was a step of his own that he was permitted to do because he was a smart man—a curious half-lounge, half-stalk, round the room.

As it was impossible to keep step with such a dance, it generally resulted in his partner's asking to sit out, which he always willingly did.

And then once more Asta found herself in the ante-room, and Major Cooper, polite, but obviously distract and hot, was making conversation. . . .

Was papa sitting where she had left him in the ball-room? How pallid he had looked! The world was cruel; people were cruel. She pictured him sitting there with that pallor, that air of infinite weariness; she saw the girls dotted about, bored, tired, left behind, like the shreds of lace, the feathers, the flowers, the beads, which the roughness of the world had torn from the dresses and discarded—things no longer of value. And then, with a rustle and a sound of the pearl pendants, the pink dress came in and sat down close beside Asta. She was telling a story to a couple of men at which they laughed a great deal. Fragments of it fell on the girl's ears. . . .

Major Cooper's conversation, meanwhile, had consisted almost entirely of inquiries as to Asta's liking for the various exercises of riding, driving and hunting, and at last, having grasped the disconcerting fact that she cared for no sport and took no exercise, he listlessly fell to listening to what Mrs. Donnithorne was saying. Then she beckoned him to her, and, asking Asta to excuse him for a moment, he rose and stood talking to her.

She had, it seemed, a great deal to say about a waltz she wished him to change for another—a

mistake had been made as to the number of a quadrille she had given him; the other two men joined in and all compared programmes.

And Asta sat there alone.

Where was poor papa? For what sort of people was she sacrificing the one and only person she loved in the world? For people who neglected her; for Colonel Skene, who concealed indifference under a polite and pleasant exterior. Was this pleasure? There came to her mind the thought of how ill they could afford the cab. Then she remembered how gaily poor Judith had dressed her for this sacrifice, and how she had ironed out the red dress, saying it would look as good as new.

A feeling of grief and indignation took possession of the girl; she was the same girl whom Colonel Skene had admired, and what then had turned him from her? Were such people worth considering?

Major Cooper's back was towards her, and suddenly she rose, and, unperceived by the laughing group, slipped like a shadow from the room; the little slim figure drifted into and across the almost empty ball-room. . . .

Yes, it was as she had pictured it—the stray women sitting about, and papa, infinitely sad, infinitely weary, with that grey look in the face that always gave her a pang, sitting there half asleep.

'Where have you left your partner, dear?' he asked, waking from his forced reverie.

'In the next room.'

'But, my dear, is it not a little unusual to wander about a ball-room alone? Should a girl——?' he paused.

'Oh no, a girl shouldn't, no doubt, but I couldn't help it. I came because I wondered how you were and what you were doing, and if you had anyone to talk to.'

'Well, my dear,' replied the Vicar, rising and stretching himself; 'I can't say I have had anyone to speak to; I can't say that our host has been near me. I confess to feeling a little surprised at what I must call very gross neglect. I wish someone would even offer me a cup of coffee; I should be very thankful, I'm sure. Don't you think all this is very curious conduct on the part of Colonel Skene?'

'Well, but I never think that Church of England Christians—you know what I mean, papa—such as you've made me belong to—are very kind to each other; at least, they always seem to me to——'

'Christians be blowed!' interrupted Mr. Steele testily. 'Decency is all I ask for here! He is aware that we are both strangers, knowing no one, and yet leaves you sitting out dance after dance. I'm sure I thought at first you were never going to dance. Has he introduced anyone else to you?'

'I have two other names on my programme.'

'Two others! and are those to last you the whole evening? Colonel Skene has no right to invite people if he can't look after them. Moreover, there was no need for you to sit out as you have been doing; there are numbers of young men present—

yes, numbers!' he repeated irritably. As Mr. Steele spoke, he paused in the operation of mopping his face to contemplate mournfully a group of subalterns who were standing close by. 'Yes, numbers of young men,' he added. 'And, Asta, just follow my eye. Do you see that, like that other group of youths I mentioned, they are smiling towards us as if they would like to know us? Yes, yes, child, I am aware you think otherwise, but I flatter myself I know the look that says people desire an introduction.'

'I don't think I have often seen that look,' responded his daughter sadly. 'I've seen the looks that said they didn't want one. As for the young men, I do not want them now—no, I hate these people; they are not kind. I hate them very much indeed! But I think much more of your not having any supper. I did at first think that Colonel Skene would be good to me, and—yes—I did think the young men would ask me to dance; but now I've given that up, and I don't mind—at least, not much. But you, papa——' She stopped short with a piteous expression, and added:—'But perhaps Colonel Skene will come to us before long and offer you something.'

'He may, my dear.'

In rising to talk to Asta the Vicar had lost his seat, but they found a couple of chairs close by, and there they sat in silence.

And then, speaking rapidly and passionately, in that soft voice with the catch in it, Asta said:—

'Hateful people that they are, let us leave them!'

'Leave them? Now, do you mean? But how about the cab? It is not ordered till 2.30.'

'But we could get another. In towns such as this there are others to be had. And, listen, papa, there are soldiers at the gate. Ask a soldier to send one to us, and I will be ready, and we will leave these people. Yes, it is very easily done.'

'It is not so easy,' responded the Vicar. 'What is to become of Turrell's Sociable? What will Turrell think?'

'And what do we care what Tur-rell thinks?' said the child passionately, and stumbling over the 'r's' in the name. 'Tur-rell was very cruel, arguing the price of that nasty cab, which smells inside like damp moss. He did not care for our pleasure.'

'All the same, it will be very expensive to get another cab; it will make a very costly evening of it.' Poor Mr. Steele, as he spoke, shook his head. 'I don't want to stay, my child, but it will be a costly evening, I doubt'; and reverting to his own thoughts he said: 'And, after all, there would be no need for it if people were heartier; that's *all* that's the matter with society—people *mean* well, but they are not hearty.'

But Asta was not heeding him. She had taken the stephanotis from her bosom and thrown it away; it lay on the polished floor near her slender feet, and she sat clasping her hands, covered with the little mean-looking silk gloves, and looking passionately before her.

Colonel Skene passed quite close to the Steeles once, but did not see them. Carrying out Sidney Smith's definition of charity—A asking B to give something to C—though he was too much taken up with Mrs. Donnithorne to dance himself with Asta, he had seized on a civilian who had arrived late, and, accompanied by his precious charge, was looking everywhere for a worn-looking clerical and a shabby red dress. In a crush he stopped for a moment to speak to an acquaintance, and in that moment his civilian was torn from him.

'Bad luck to it!' said Colonel Skene, looking back and seeing that he was gone—'bad luck to it!'

Well, he hoped Miss Steele was dancing. He had introduced several men, and possibly she knew more. Of Mr. Steele he did not think at all. He had a duty dance coming off, and must look up his partner for it. After all, he couldn't attend to everyone. . . . And after this were more dances with Mrs. Donnithorne, and Freda was a person of very considerable fascination. . . . What a curious woman Freda was! Though Skene would not own it, all the old glamour was returning. What a clever, clever tongue! And she had said something to him this evening that had driven all else from his mind—something that had puzzled him. She had reproached him—seemed to wish that things should be again as they had been.

His feelings were very complex. Did he love Freda Donnithorne? He didn't think well of her; he scarcely, he believed, even had a passion for her

now. He knew lovers had been before him, and that they would come after. None the less, he was strangely excited by her presence to-night. Mrs. Donnithorne was the type of woman the real Colonel Skene loved; it was only the conventional Skene who affected to admire a higher type, and who would eventually, no doubt, for convenience, marry that higher type. He no longer wished to leave the ball-room, as he had vaguely longed to do in the first excitement of Freda's presence.

Of Asta Steele he did not think now, except occasionally, did not realize how the evening was passing for her in neglect and humiliation, had not observed the tragic pallor in the face of this odd little girl.

He had spent almost the whole evening with Freda, and enjoyed the discomfiture of Shorthouse in an amused way. . . . It amused him, too, to be very polite and agreeable to Shorthouse, and Shorthouse was pleasant with him—so much so, that young Felton had remarked on the camaraderie of the two with an ugly smile.

But, although there was an excitement in Freda's presence to-night, Skene was not proud of being with her, as he had once been. Deep down in his good-tempered, easy-going nature there was a slight meanness of disposition which caused him to take note of the fact that Mrs. Donnithorne was going down in the world. She had been too daring lately; people had begun to fight a little shy of her. Not that her morals and life were worse now than they

had been when Society had admired her, but because she was older and less handsome, and because people had become a little tired of what she could give them in exchange for tolerating her. As a fact, the residents and garrison of Chatham had, at the time she was popular, known just as much as they now knew of her achievements.

Then, too, Mr. Donnithorne seldom now accompanied her, tired of a position that was ludicrous—the position of a husband who is a bad third—of long standing in heated rooms, of tedious drives to the houses of people who didn't interest him, of seeing his wife in equivocal positions, of listening to equivocal talk. . . . He was not angry with his wife; he had even ceased to morally focus her—it was too much trouble. All this, as Skene knew, was responsible for the rather light position that Freda Donnithorne was now undoubtedly beginning to take.

'Are you alright, old man?' asked Colonel Skene of him pleasantly as he passed him.

'Alright,' he returned sulkily, for he disliked Skene as much as he took the trouble to dislike anyone; and then, continuing his way along a passage out of the ante-room, Donnithorne found his way to a little room on the right, where some men were smoking. There he lit a cigar and sat, occasionally chatting to the accompaniment of the steady pound-pound of the lancers and the screech of the violins.

'Fairy footsteps,' commented an old, red-faced bachelor Major by the door, as a more than usually

rollicking polka shook the boards beneath their feet and ended with a flourish.

Presently a colonel of Marines, whose daughters' exertions were contributing to this din, asked very gravely why in Heaven's name people, instead of flourishing their heels about like this, couldn't be content to stay at home—‘in their beds,’ he added as an after-thought and with rather a vague look.

This sentiment was well received by two men by the door—non-dancing husbands of dance-loving wives. But Donnithorne’s face was expressionless; he remained simply a fair, bald block of a man, about whose thoughts you could guess nothing. It was impossible to imagine Donnithorne in bed, or, indeed, anywhere but at social functions; an onlooker at the pleasures of others—that shadowy third whom the world required as a voucher that he, like itself, was willing, for his own ends, to affect a belief in his wife’s virtue.

It was not a bad face, and he was not a bad fellow, but he was beginning to look old and worn. The elderly Major, a determined woman-hater, scanned it to-night with interest and some little melancholy satisfaction.

‘Poor wretch!’ said he to himself. ‘Another married man gone to the devil! . . .’

At this moment a tired-looking man in clerical dress looked in.

‘Pray excuse my interrupting you here,’ he said, ‘but can you tell me where I can get a cab?’

‘Sensible man!’ thought the red-faced Major.

'He's trying to leave this infernal dance.' Aloud he replied:—'I don't know, really, where you will get one as late as this.'

'I have not ordered my cab till two, and my daughter—— I must get one if I can.' The voice was querulous.

'Slodgers', at the corner of Temple Street, is the nearest. You might perhaps knock them up, or you might, by luck, find some wandering cab.'

'I thank you,' said the old parson, withdrawing his head and shoulders from the doorway.

CHAPTER XIV

AT half-past one the solitude of the road before the Vicarage was disturbed by a cab being driven along it. Standing back from the elm-bordered road and surrounded by trees, the house lay still and sleeping in the night. Its upper windows were masked and seemed to contain sleepers; but below, a light showed through the glass panels of the hall-door, and fell with a faint glistening on the leaves of the laurestines outside and on their white blossoms, wet from heavy rain.

‘Do you want me to go inside?’ indignantly asked the cabman, who had been drinking, as he pulled up outside the drive-gate.

‘Yes, yes, please,’ replied Asta’s voice from the cab, with an anguished note in it; and looking out of the window, she watched him fastening back the gate; he did it grumbling and muttering to himself.

Asta had rung the bell, and stood waiting. The rain had washed the gravel path clean. A beech-tree near the door, at every gust of wind, scattered drops of rain on Mr. Steele and his daughter; as the rain fell on the Vicar’s face he shivered. There was an indescribable suggestion of humiliation and defeat in the attitude of the couple; and as they waited,

they looked at the light behind the door-panels as outcasts might at the glimmering lights of a refuge.

The door opened, as it seemed, by some invisible hand, and they stepped within.

' You look a pretty object, Judith ! ' murmured the Vicar crossly, as he glanced round the door and saw who had admitted them. ' What have you done to your head ? '

' I'se got de toofache,' replied the negress, emerging from behind the door with a white bandage over one eye.

Mr. Steele gave a keen look at her.

' Then, what do you tie your eye up for ? '

' Cause I got it *in* de eye,' she responded sullenly, but with an attempt at a toss of the head—' cause dat's where it *is*.'

' You're an old fool, Judy ! ' observed the Vicar crossly.

Judith gave him a piercing look from the unbandaged eye, and then said, addressing her young mistress :—

' Yo' home most uncommonly spry, Miss Asta, honey. What's de matter ? Me not expectin' yo' till three o'clock.'

' Nurse,' said Asta, throwing aside the shawl and letting down from her arm the draggled, tawdry skirt of the red dress, ' Papa had no overcoat, and he went out to get a cab in the pouring rain, and he has been sitting in wet clothes all the long drive. Just think of it ! Will it not make him ill ? It is sure to ! Oh, I am miserable ! '

'Ill? Nonsense!' interposed her father very wearily, and turning to go upstairs. 'I'm a bit tired, that's all.' After a little pause he added:— 'It was a costly evening, and a most unsatisfactory one. The old curse of Society—want of heartiness. Dear, dear me! why can't people be hearty? there's nothing easier. I don't think I care about balls. I never was a Society man; I don't go in for it. Yes, Asta, I'll get to bed now, of course. And do you, too, child. You must be tired; young ladies always are after a ball.'

The rays of the paraffin lamp over the door, falling on Asta's face, showed an indescribable expression of sorrow on it. She gazed at her father with a look that was at once compassionate and tender. Poor papa was, even now, after this evening of disaster, putting the best face on these hateful circumstances, and trying to show the faith in himself and his daughter which others tried so hard to tear from them.

'You look a pretty sight, Judith!' repeated Mr. Steele, recurring to his original theme as he climbed slowly upstairs and glanced down at his retainer. 'Are you going to scare the birds?'

'No, sir, dere's uvers dat's more fit for dat,' replied Judith in respectful tones, but with a scathing look through the balustrades at her master.

'Fetch me the decanter of whisky and a tumbler, and be quick about it!' ordered Mr. Steele sharply, without appearing to notice the remark. 'Good-night, Asta dear; I shall be alright in the morning. What,

love? Very ill? Nonsense! These social evenings are a little wearisome to a man who, like myself, is a recluse; that is all—that is really all. As for getting wet, I shall be alright to-morrow. One must, for the sake of others, shew one's self in society occasionally; but one must not complain at finding it hollow. It was distinctly hollow this evening—distinctly. There, there, Asta, you are crushing your dainty ball-dress against my old black coat. Good-night, dear, good-night. Call you if I feel ill? I shan't be ill. I shall be asleep when I've had a biscuit and a glass of whisky. You have something to eat yourself.'

But the child still clung to him.

'There, there,' said her father, patting her on the cheek and kissing her tenderly; 'we shall both be the better for a rest.'

There had been poignant inquiry in the black woman's face, but she had been restrained by her master's presence from too pressing questions; she was, however, keenly aware that some calamity had occurred to her family. As she put out the hall-lamp, and performed her nightly duty of locking up and seeing that all was straight, her one bright, unbandaged eye took in a good deal. She had decked her child for this festivity with infinite pains, and in such a manner, she felt, as to make certain the realization of her repeated boast that her young mistress would 'knock de stuffin' out of the other ladies. She had watched Asta, her finery protected

by the white Indian shawl, setting forth jubilant and happy, and now she beheld her returning weeping. What had happened? An evil expression crossed the negress's face.

When she had ascertained that all was in order in the shabby hall and bolted the door, she followed Asta upstairs.

The child had climbed up to her room, with the ugly white shawl in a bundle in her arms. Now that her father was gone, she was crying without restraint.

Her bedroom window was open, and the wind took the muslin curtains and blew them gently in and out; a delicate, fine smell of wet earth and of ivy and jasmine was in the night. Asta went forward into the room, and stood looking out into the darkness. It no longer rained, but every now and again the breeze shook the creepers on the wall and scattered the moisture in showers.

Chatham lay over there; yes, between those two black trees and that thunder-cloud was the town towards which, many days of late, she had looked and beheld it lying before her, obscure and grey, and crowned with smoke-drifts.

As she stood, she became sensible of the shawl which she had worn to the ball, and was still holding. She threw it to the ground and trampled on it, and began tearing open the fastenings of the red dress. When she had divested herself of this she paused for a moment, and in that moment caught sight of the reflection in the glass of her smooth,

sleek brown neck, where the steel cross, the emblem of Christianity, hung by a scarlet velvet.

By day or night, ever since she had learnt this new religion, it had lain on her bosom as a charm against the devil. She wrenched it from its fastening and threw it down.

'That too—that too,' she murmured, treading it roughly under foot.

'My, Asta, what yo' 'bout,' cried Judith, running in, 'and what yo' stampin' on? Not de cross?' She stopped short, aghast. 'My sakes, chol', dis bring ill luck; dis a fetish of de white people—dis like to bring demons round, if it ain't done it already!' She looked fearfully about into the shadows of the room.

'What do I care for the fetish of the white people? I stamp on it because it is their fetish, and false and lying like themselves. There is no strength in it. What good has it done me? Evil, rather. It has permitted me to be wretched. It has hung there while I cried and was miserable, and has not helped me. I have worn it night and day since I came to this accursed place, and now I break it—so—under my feet!'

'Mark my words, Asta, dere's somefin' bad to come after dis here discourse. Shut dat window, chol'. I wonder yo's not 'fraid to stand so close to de black night—dere's nuffin' good in dat darkness. Skeery fings walk by night dat ain't good to be near. Huh! dere's somefin' *now!* Sakes, Miss Asta, what's *dat?*'

'It is a male owl calling, and a female replying. Do not try to frighten me! As for the cross, it is powerless; I have proved it. Here, Judith, take these flowers out of my hair—they are entangled; be quick, my head aches!'

The negress complied sulkily.

'Dat ain't no owl replyin' to no females,' she muttered huskily; 'dat's somefin' bad replyin' to somefin' else bad, dat's been called up by dis here foolishness!'

'I do not care!'

'But I keers, Asta,' observed the woman in a whimpering voice. 'And yo' fink of dose dat's got to sleep in de nex' room, wiv open doors just handy for demons! I ain't said nuffin', and 'pears I'se to suffer for dose dat has.'

'There, there!' said the girl; 'take the dress and the cloak away—you may burn them!'

'It seems dis very curious temper, Miss Asta,' said the black woman indignantly, but gathering up the discarded clothes over her arms, and groping for the fragments of the trinket; and then, with an abrupt change to tenderness:—'My own honey,' she said, 'why yo' cry and not tell Judith? and why yo' come home so early? Dis Colonel not——'

She paused, with a keen look of inquiry.

'Do not ask me, nurse,' answered the child with quivering lips. 'You know how happy I was when I started, and you see me now, that is enough; it kills me to think of it. Let to-night pass and be wiped out. I have done with the white officer.'

There was silence in the room for awhile, broken only by the sound of the woman's footsteps as she busied herself about the room, and the rustling, sighing murmurs from the darkness outside. The candle, blown by the night-breezes, threw extraordinary shadows of Judith as she walked to and fro. Now a distorted silhouette quivered on the ceiling, and then, when she moved, danced and flitted on the wall.

Asta had been sitting on her bed, but she now rose and went to the window.

'I have grieved enough,' she said. 'I will grieve no more; it is not worth it. There, Judith, there's your demon, as you call him, crying again, but I don't care, let him cry, and if he comes in here I shall not be afraid. Don't be so silly! . . . You ask, nurse, why we left the dance. We left because it was wretched and no one wanted us—no one. There, you may know it! Ah, Judith, and instead of looking beautiful, I looked very, very ugly; the youngest Miss Williams never looked as ugly as I, and the Colonel no longer cares for me. There, now you have heard the whole, so now let me go to bed. Do not rustle about the room with those things on your arm; burn them or bury them, that I may never see them again.'

'Pears to me dis very curious love-makin' ob de Colonel; dis don't hab much——'

'It was not love-making, nurse; he loves someone else and was only playing with me. It is Mrs. Donnithorne he loves.'

'Ah! Mrs. Donnithorne.'

'Do you know the name?'

'Mr. Walton, he speak of Mrs. Donnithorne.'

'But, Judith, you didn't tell me.'

'Yes, and a good many speak ob dis Mrs. Donnithorne,' said the negress. 'I'se heard many speakin' 'bout dat female.'

'Ah! why didn't you tell me?'

'I sees and I hears, chol', but I don't say nuffin,' replied the black woman solemnly. 'All dis de Colonel's fault. I hears all dis, but I don't suppose dat female goin' to be dere dat evening. I fought from what Mr. Walton he say, she was one ob dose loose females. I not fink loose white trash like dat shakin' roun' at dis here ball. I fought dis ball for de quality.'

'She is quality, nurse. People seemed to like her very much, and she had on a dress that was very beautiful and covered with pearls; when she walked, it made a little trembling sound like the rain. I never saw shoulders and arms as white as hers—yes, the snow is not whiter—and they were very, very naked. For all that, she is not as handsome as I—her face is ugly. Low down on her bosom—here, Judith—she wears a little dot of black velvet; yes, I saw her licking it and sticking it on. Her hair was very marvellously done—all in ripples, like Mr. Vinter's retriever, only her hair is not that colour; and a diamond brooch, shaped like a crescent moon, fastens up the curls of it behind. She is always talking, and her voice is rather loud. She had

stockings on, the colour of flesh, and when she sits down she shews laces and silken things, so that everyone sees at once her beautiful petticoats and her pink shoes.'

'Yes, yes, all dis similar to what Mr. Walton say. Walton say she very stylish female and belong Colonel Skene; but he say—te, hee!—Mr. Short-house he hab more money dan Colonel Skene, and so she reckon now belong Mr. Shorthouse.'

'But she has a husband, Judith. Would he permit this if it were true? Can it be true? Would he not be extremely angry and do something?'

'I dessay he sees a rotten mellion lyin' in he's garden, but he don't always cut it off de stalk and shovel it away dat very minute. All de same, if *he* calculate not to mind dis, very curious circumstance dat all dese uver people ob de same turn ob mind, dey all calculate dey won't say nuffin'. In de meantime de Colonel flies roun' wif dis gay female, and yo' ain't dancin' and don't hab no supper—all dese outrageous circumstances in my opinion. Asta,' lowering her voice solemnly, 'I ain't long returned from dis Chatham myself. Shut dat door, honey, and wipe yo'r eyes—dis has been a black night. Sh! don't talk loud, and turn de key ob dat door. . . .

'Asta, chol', I ain't been back long myself from dis here confounded ball. I sheered my mind to seein' dat ball and de military, and I've only seen de military, but dey is enough for me.'

'Judith!'

'Ah, it was "Judith," too, and nice treatment! But I'se make up my mind I'se go to dat ball. I talk dis matter over wiv Mr. Simpson at de post-office, and in course ob conversation it transpires dat dat cock-eyed old hoss ob he's got to go into Chatham sometime, bring in dat niece ob he's in service wiv some ob de military, and seein' dat Joe Stubbs got to drive in wiv de gal, we arrange dat I go too.

"De more ballas' behime ole Cockeye de better," I says to Mr. Simpson, "prevent him runnin' away frough bein' so young"—te, hee! Ole Simpson an' de gal, dey humours de joke, and dis night we sets out jus' behime ole Turrell's so yo'r papa don't see us. Ole Turrell's mare take *she's* time, ole Cockeye take *he's*. Dere ain't much difficulty in keepin' behime wiv him. If dere was medals for bein' unsafe on he's feet and cussedly slow, dat hoss come out in style.

'At last we drops dat young gal at she's aunt for de night and drives roun' to de barracks, and I gits down. Dis pretty late, all de carriages gone 'way. De sentry on de gate walk up and down very brisk wiv his scarlick chest stuffed out to here, and den he stop to look at me.

"What's yo'r business?" he says.

"Sentry," I says, "I'se come to help wiv dis here ball," I says.

"Help wiv it? What yo' mean, woman," says he, "by helpin' wiv it?"

"I'se come here," I says, "to help de ladies undress and hand dem deir teekuts."

" " Then yo'r a bit late in comin', me woman," he says. " De last lady came in half an hour gone, an' if she ain't got she's cloves off by now she never will."

" " Dat's my poor delicate lady mistres," I says. " I'se late frough dis here contemptuous hoss breakin' down, but, Captain, you please let me frough," I says; " den I be in that room handy when de ball finish to help her out."

" " It seems to me yo' want helpin' out yo'rself," he says, very impudent. " Yo'r mad or drunk, one or t'other. The officers' ladies hab sent deir women to help, and we don't want no niggers. Come," he says, " sheer off ob dis doorway!"

" Dis moment a corp'ril dat's been standin' by listenin' says: " What yo' gassin' 'bout to de sentry, woman? Come, we don't want no females hangin' 'bout dese gates," he says, " off yo' go!"

" " Colonel," I says to him, " yo', perhaps, got more power dan dat miserable sentry. I want git in dis here ball, help de ladies in de cloak-room ; let me pass," I says.

" " Come," says de sentry, speakin' very short, " clear out ob dis, or I'll make yo'! We don't want no loose females 'bout de barracks—it's agin orders, and we don't want them females niggers, anyhow!"

" " Niggers, indeed!" I says to dem, " dis nice talk for a couple ob low-down pigeon-breasted lobsters! I should fink yo' was both biled in yo'r coats and spent most ob yo'r money in straw to pad yo'r chests! Go 'long," I says, " speakin' to

respectable women for de first time in yo'r lives!" And wiv dat, seein' dey bofe come forward threatenin', I see dis no more use, and I gits up again behime dat ole hoss. By dat time, de rain begin comin' down, but I puts up me parasol and we drives along, me and Joe sittin' under it, chattin' pleasant. Sudden Joe says: "Take dat parasol out ob my eye, woman; where's we goin'?" And de cart, of a sudden, gives a heave, and de next fing Joe lyin' in de road and me top ob de hedge and Cockeye in de ditch; dat's where I'se accumulated dis eye, honey!

'De cart not broken, and Joe and me right de cart, and set de whole infernal machine goin' behime Cockeye again. But 'pears now dat hoss considerably shaken in he's nerves by dat occurrence; all de while now he shakin' and tremblin', he's frightened by branches ob trees, and stones in de road, taking everyfing personal. He look over a hedge and see a donkey, and nearly lays down and dies; de whip make him start, and if Joe don't whip him he don't go at all, but stan's still and trembles like he's seen a ghost.

'At last Joe's temper riz:

"Seems like we don't git home till de mornin,'" he says, and he gits up, standin' like dose men which drives chariots in de circus.

"Hold tight!" he says, and wiv dat he let fly wiv de whip. At de first jump dat hoss give, de parasol starts from me hand; den de hoss don't go at all. Den Joe gets up and stan's over him again; den de

hoss fly forward and stop still again, lookin' at de groun' wiv his ears laying down.

"Let me down," I says.

"Sit tight!" Joe says, very angry, and catches him another smack behime.

'Wiv dat he turn sharp roun', and dis moment one of he's wheels come off; he rush wiv de uver wheel up a bank and fall down he'sself, and den de uver blime wheel come off. Dat hoss look roun' and see dis circumstances, an sort ob give up hope; he see dat he's misfortunate. I'se frown out on me hands and knees; dat's enough for me.

'Where Joe is and where de hoss is I dunno, and I don't care; I'se left dem on de bank and walk home. I'se come in very careful dat aunt don't ketch me, and I ties up me eye and waits for yo'.'

'Are you much hurt, nurse?'

'Me spirits is hurt, Asta chol'; I ain't what I were. Between dem sentries and dat book yo'r aunt lent yo', I don't seem to see me way. Dat marriage prognosis ain't satisfactory, and I'se turn it over in me mind, and yet I can't do nuffin'. I'd like to scratch the corp'ril dis evenin' and I can't do dat. I'd like to put somefin' in someone's soup, but dat not possible. Very, very difficult pass dose interferin' sentries and git into de barracks, and when you do, dis very difficult to find de Colonel officer, and he very wary and spry, he ain't no fool. Yo' mix love-drinks for dis Colonel, he simply don't swaller dem; and dis not possible to git to his dinner, he take he's dinner in de mess, and by de time de love-

powder mix wiv de food ob de whole ob de mess, it ain't doin' any ob dem any good, or makin' dem a ha'porth more lovin' den dey was before. Same by poison: what kills one only gives de mess de stomach-ache. All dis is tryin' to de temper. Asta chol', an'—'

'I do not want the Colonel poisoned,' interrupted Asta. 'I do not either love or hate him well enough for that; you anger me by speaking so often of him, and why do you? He is done with, and to me now like a dead thing under the ground, hidden deep, with the earth stamped down above him. I have put in with him all the false gods I have been told of since I came here; they lie in one grave and the clay is round them, and they will never come up again to vex me. Good-night, Judith!'

CHAPTER XV

‘ You had better go over to Whepstead at once, Asta, and ask Mr. Safford to take your father’s service to-day. You know what these attacks of yours are, Robert.’

Mrs. Case spoke with a certain brisk impatience of illness.

Her niece was standing before her with a miserable expression, and with eyes that matched her face. She had been crying.

‘ Why cannot I stay with papa ?’ she asked ; and then, lowering her voice so that the sick man should not hear her, she murmured : ‘ And why cannot the people do without their service just for to-day ? Look at them ! Is it doing them any good ? Surely just this once——’

‘ Much you care as to whether it is doing them good or not,’ responded Mrs. Case impatiently ; ‘ but let me tell you, the work of the world must go on, quite independently of illness and death. Dear me ! the day after I buried my poor father I took my Girls’ Friendly, and none of the girls guessed—I was so bright, so gay. I suppose the fact is you object to going to Mr. Safford’s—that’s the plain English of it.’

'It is not that. I do not care whether it is Mr. Safford I go to or anyone else.'

The girl still lingered about. She looked sorrowfully at her father. She had gone to him in the early morning and found him ill. She had seen him like this once or twice before; the only difference was that now she felt herself to blame for this suffering. It had been that dreadful evening and the wetting that had caused it. Yes, it had all been through her desire to see the Colonel, and then, on her return, in a fit of rage she had struck at the cross and had broken it. The broken cross might have considerable bearing on this, she believed. Certainly the cross had never helped her, but might not that have been because of insufficient faith, and because, as papa said, she had come late on religion and had not learnt it properly? Papa, who knew a great deal, believed in it, and trusted implicitly in this symbol which she had broken under her feet.

There was misery in Asta's face. She would, on ordinary occasions, have combated her aunt's suggestion of going to Mr. Safford's, but now a feeling of guilt oppressed her too much, and without another word she went up to her room to dress.

Judith was making her bed. Shutting the door behind her, Asta went forward into the room.

'Judith,' she said, 'where did you put the pieces of the cross?'

'Dey's on de mantelpiece,' replied the negress with dejection.

'It was a bad thing I did, I know, now, nurse.

You told me something would happen—yes, you warned me.'

' Dere's never no good comes ob disturbin' fetishes,' observed the negress solemnly. ' Different people has deir fetish, and dose fetishes know which people has dem, and where dey belong. Dis particular fetish he belong white people, and he knows it, an' when a white person take and smash him, stan's to reason it ain't likely he goin' to do any more for dat white person.'

' Judith, how horrible! Do you know how ill papa is? What have I done? And so far from doing me good, it will now do me all the harm it can. Oh, Judith!'

' I don't say he will, I don't say he won't. I say dis—dat it's a bad fing; and I say dis—yo'r papa bad now, but he not bad before you break dat cross—before he got de cold—now he got de newmonia. Dis a very curious circumstance.'

' Nurse,' said Asta, ' I have been thinking that I might put that cross together again, and see what that will do. Yes, I thought of all you've been saying, and I am quite determined about it. Fetch the glue; I'll do it now, before I go, to give it every chance, and I shall not be long gone. Who knows? The cross, by the time I return, may be as strong as ever, so that I can wear it again. That would please it!'

' I doubt, chol', dis do no good.'

' Why do you dishearten me?' cried Asta, bursting anew into tears. ' Why are you so unkind, nurse?

If I have done wrong in beating and stamping on the thing, and have harmed papa, what more can I do now—what more? The thing failed me, and I punished it. Come, fetch the glue!

‘Last night,’ said Judith, ‘when yo’ was asleep, dere was noises ’bout dat I knew meant somefin’. Ah, and well I knew what had caused dem noises! I heerd dem at de windows an’ doors, an’ I heerd a groanin’ an’ a hustlin’ an’ a stampin’ round. My experiaunce told me de demons of dat cross was busy, an’ now dose experiaunces done tell me dey’s finished, an’ is sittin’ down fannin’ deirselves. Dis here what yo’s doin’ is like frownin’ a dog a bone when his stommich is full. Dey’s *had* deir dinner. It ain’t likely dey’s coming to pick it up when dey’s finished deir treat.’

‘I do not care,’ replied the child dejectedly. ‘I will mend the cross and see what happens. Think of poor papa! I must do something! You have a great deal to say against it, nurse, but can you think of anything better? Your own religion doesn’t do much for you.’

Judith looked discouraged and annoyed.

‘I hasn’t set up dat my religion good for curing people; dis more in de cussin’ line and for makin’ people love yo’, and for cussin’ dem when dey don’t. What yo’r papa want now is curin’; he don’t want no more cussin’—he’s been cussed enough in dis parish for twenty ole gennelmen—ah, and in de uver parishes too. Dere, chol’, leave dis to me, an’ put on yo’r hat and fetch in Mr. Safford for de

serbices. And don't yo' cry. If I was yo', Miss Asta, I'd put a piece of dis glue right down he's back; dat seem to give he's constitution more chance dan if yo' put him on in lumps. Yo' know, chol', it ain't altogever de fetish dat has damaged yo'r pa. Dis bein' a Christian is mighty unhealfy work if de uvers ain't Christians too. De Scriptures say so. De Scriptures allow dat if some one give a Christian a slap, dat Christian boun' to turn de uver side, so de man git anuver lick at him. Den, I say, Miss Asta, dis ain't healfy unless bofe is Christians, and I say dat dis more sensible and reasonable for de Christian to give de uver a smack and knock some ob de cussedness out ob de feller, and show he dat de Christian won't stan' he's infernal nonsense. Dis more likely to stop de unpleasantness den turnin' de uver side. But above all, Miss Asta, don't be a Christian all alone. Dat's what's been unhealfy for yo'r poor pa; dere ain't been no uver true Christian in de village. Dis has been a solo he's been performin'.'

Asta had been busy with the broken cross, and now cast a look full of anxiety on the woman.

'It won't hold, nurse. What shall I do?' she cried.

'Perhaps, chol', dis here do better if yo' fasten one ob dese matches up he's back; dat give dis here gum time to dry before he fall to pieces. Dere's aunt callin' yo'. Fly, chol'; I'se attendin' to dis here. Don't yo' cry.'

CHAPTER XVI

ASTA STEELE swung back the kissing-gate that led out from the Vicar's field and found herself on the high-road. The rain of last night had dried, and the market-carts passing to London had once more stirred up the powdery earth. At the first steps she took, her little, cheap-looking Oxford shoes and the black stockings on her thin ankles were white with the powdered chalk. She wore her sailor-hat on the back of her head; its brim rested on the knot of black hair low on her neck behind, and within the aureole formed round her face by its brim, her dusky hair made a setting for the pallor of her face. A tumbled, cotton dress clung to the sinuous figure. In one hand she carried the note to Mr. Safford, and in the other Mrs. Case's brown and white striped parasol.

It was only ten o'clock. The sun was not yet very powerful; but a haze lay on the country—the forerunner of an intense heat. The great elms bordering the high-road were of a blackish cold green, with patches burnt brown or yellow from the glare. Tall, dusty white nettles filled the hedges and struggled for life with bachelor's-buttons and wild parsley.

She was thinking of her father, of Judith, but,

above all, of last night's hateful experience and of the shattered cross. Although she had been crying about her father's illness, she was not yet very much afraid, for it had been the winter-time—the snow, the ice, and the east wind—she feared for him, and he had been much worse than he now seemed and had recovered. Her tears, therefore, had not been altogether for him, but because everything seemed now to have failed her—yes, the whole thing. The religion she had been taught was, considered as a religion of goodness and mercy, a failure ; its teachings, myths in which she no longer believed ; its disciples, people who practised not one fair virtue. Still, if the thing would do no good to her—if it had remained supine while she prayed and was miserable, and, yes, most undoubtedly had allowed papa, who believed in it and obeyed it, to be flouted by its followers—that did not at all prove that, once aroused and defied, it could not set about doing evil. That there were malignant forces in it she did not doubt, and, pondering on this, she reflected with remorse on her action of last night.

Walking swiftly, she had soon left behind the tree-bordered high-road, and was traversing lanes, on either side of which the hops were growing. Hop-grounds extended for miles, dotted here and there with the crooked, red chimneys of oast-houses. The hop-vines stood above the hedges, straggling, throwing their bines from one to the other. In the dusk of summer evenings, returning from rambles with Judith, they had always looked to her like animate

beings fighting and struggling for life, supporting one, oppressing and ruining another; the strangling fingers of their tendrils dwarfing and changing the growth of the weaker plants, and their poles, dragged down with their weight and slanting in every direction, had seemed to carry out this idea of a struggle to the death.

Now, as she looked at them in the sunshine, she was wondering whether, this year, when they were ripe and the people from London came to pick them, she would be allowed to go off with Judith and spend the day in Mr. Vinter's grounds, and help to gather them as she had done last summer. Ah! but more than ever lately her aunt's dislike of Judith had seemed to increase. What should she do if this threat of sending her home to St. Lucia should be carried out?

Whepstead lay before her, and she could see the green square of orchard which enclosed the curate's house, and its red chimneys appearing above the apple-trees. Beside the high-road on which she was walking was the Vicarage where the Williamses lived, and she must pass under the Vicarage windows to get to Mr. Safford's. She was not, however, thinking of the Williamses to-day, and beyond the hints thrown out by Mrs. Case, she had no idea that Amy Williams considered her a rival. Aunt Jane had marriage on the brain, and always thought that everyone wanted to marry everyone else.

But from the side-window of a room where the Misses Williams sat at work with their mother they

had for some minutes noticed the approach of Asta with some excitement.

'What is Asta Steele doing out in this direction, and so early?' the elder girl had exclaimed.

Amy Williams put aside her needlework, and looked at the distant figure with an intense dislike in her pale, soft-featured face.

'There is something white in her hand,' she said.
'It is a letter—yes, that's what it is.'

'I hope she is not coming to us with another invitation to any more of their parties,' murmured Mrs. Williams anxiously. 'Your father doesn't like to refuse, and yet, of course, we can't go.'

She spoke dejectedly.

Mrs. Williams, like many modern mothers, was completely stage-managed by her daughters, and they, like most modern young women, were in the habit of blaming her and their father for every convention forced on them and for every weariness of the flesh—and Whepstead was a weary place for young flesh. In particular, as Mrs. Williams knew, the sight of Asta Steele and the knowledge of John Safford's feeling for her always acted as a strong irritant.

'You rather speak, mother, as if you would like to go,' suggested the younger girl, whom the great heat, combined with home dressmaking, had made irritable.

'My dear, I'm sure I don't,' responded Mrs. Williams quickly.

'I don't think that even the Steele obtuseness

could misunderstand our treatment of their last invitation,' observed the elder daughter.

'I don't know what it is, but that creature always seems to bring misery with her,' said Amy Williams peevishly. 'She destroyed all the pleasure of the Dalmers' party—it made me sick even to see her there—and now she is making my head ache. Why can't she stay at home?'

'Don't you think you are a little anæmic?' asked Mrs. Williams, who was profoundly deficient in imagination, and never knew when she was saying an undesirable thing. 'I think running about would cure the headaches.'

This remark was received in disapproving silence by the girls as very unsympathetic; then the elder one said soothingly:—

'She is enough to make one's head ache; she looks horrid, particularly in this hot weather. She reminds me of that poem by someone:—

"Beside the ungathered rice he lay,
His sickle in his hand."

She looks like an escaped slave, or something nasty and hot.'

'My dear—my dear!' murmured Mrs. Williams, in deprecation of the style of one lady using the words 'nasty and hot' in describing another.

But without heeding her the elder girl continued:—

'But there's one thing: Mr. Safford and she have evidently quarrelled; he was talking to Mrs. Case all the time at the Dalmers'. That doesn't look

particularly— My dear, I don't believe she is coming here with that letter. No, she is not; she must be bringing it to Mr. Safford. Yes; where else? There's no one else within walking distance. Well, of all the disgraceful—'

'What do you think of that, mother?' asked Amy Williams; 'you always thought we were too down on her, but *now*—'

Mrs. Williams looked rather more depressed than usual, but made no comment.

Her younger daughter was standing at the window staring after Asta Steele's receding figure; there was a blank look of dismay in the blue eyes. For a moment the very ordinary face and meaningless carriage and figure of the girl were lifted above the commonplace, and she was no longer only one out of the thousands of girls in blue skirts and cotton blouses.

'I shall speak to her on the way back and make her tell me whether they have quarrelled,' she said, turning from the window.

'How can you do that?' asked her mother, with a troubled air.

'Simply call her up here and make her tell us.'

'But, my dear, she will think it very rude; you cannot do so.'

'And are we to study what she thinks? Besides, she doesn't know what is rude and what isn't. A half-darkie creature—who cares what she thinks?'

'My dear, then perhaps what I think is of some importance; I think it will be unladylike of you.

I would much rather you left your curiosity to be satisfied when next you meet in the natural course of events. You are not intimate enough with her; it wouldn't do at all.'

A mulish expression came on the soft white face, and the yellowy-pink, bloodless mouth took on a set look.

'I shall do as I like, mother,' she said. 'I didn't want to be born; I'm very sorry I was. I hate my life; I sit about making blouses till I'm sick, and what is the end of it all? My head is racking; there is no good in my life, and there is only one thing I take any interest in; that one thing I mean to find out, whether it is ladylike or no. What do you get by being ladylike?'

Mrs. Williams might have replied that neither of her daughters had ever put themselves in a position to solve this problem, but she merely looked depressed and went on with her work, fearing by any answer to provoke a scene.

'All the unladylike, forward girls, who get up their faces and are a mass of powder and rouge, and do all the things you tell us not to do, get all the nice men, while we——'

She was again staring feverishly out of the window.

'Do as you like,' Mrs. Williams said miserably; 'your father and I have done our best for you. It is cruel of you to say what you do of your lives. Guide yourselves, then, now; I won't interfere.'

'Is Asta Steele ladylike, pray? She seems to get on all right.'

'Asta Steele!' said Mrs. Williams, with a tired look; 'who said she was, and what have I ever cared about her? She is neither ladylike nor the reverse; she is simply an oddity—a foreign wild thing. Have I ever expressed admiration for her or wished you to know her?'

But Amy Williams made no reply. Asta Steele had evidently left the note on Mr. Safford, and was retracing her steps. From the Vicarage windows the slim figure, with the dark face above, framed in the straw aureole, could be seen returning. Amy Williams leant a little out of the window and looked down, a desperate resolve on the insipid face.

'Miss Steele,' she said, 'will you please come in just for a moment?'

Thus addressed, Asta stopped still in her walk, and looked up at the window with unfeigned surprise.

'What is it?' she asked awkwardly.

'Something I want to ask you,' replied the other girl. 'Don't look so frightened,' she added, with a laugh.

'I am not frightened of you,' murmured Asta Steele, throwing back the iron gate and entering the house. . . .

Mrs. Williams went forward to receive her, but the elder girl remained seated, and Amy Williams merely tendered a frigid hand. Having accomplished what she desired, the smile she had put on when

inviting the girl to enter the house had given place to a look of unmistakable dislike. Although jealousy and hatred, combined with the disease from which she was suffering, had disorganized her mind to the extent of allowing her to place herself in her present position, she was uncertain how to proceed, and there was something in Asta Steele's eyes which made her pause.

This girl was an unknown quantity. What would she do under the insult? Amy Williams meditated. She stood there now, odd-looking, but very dignified, in her dusty little down-at-heel shoes, her thin ankles appearing below her short cotton skirt; her bodice open, foreign fashion, at the neck, showing her brown throat, bound by the scarlet velvet ribbon from which the cross had always before hung; that ridiculous straw hat on the back of her head, with crumpled black velvet strings tied below her hair at the back. That she had been crying was evident, and the mind of the love-sick girl, centred on one object, at once imagined that this grief must have some connection with that object. A quarrel with Mr. Safford —a reconciliation with Mr. Safford: one of these things only could be the cause of tears.

'A hot day for a walk,' observed Mrs. Williams nervously, with the intention of covering the awkwardness of the situation. 'Sit here, Miss Steele, and rest before you go on.'

But Asta made no attempt to rest herself in the proffered chair, and stood still, regarding the trio with her long, dark eyes.

'What is it you wish to say to me?' she asked presently, in the soft, broken voice, with its suggestion of a foreign accent, and addressing Amy Williams.

'Why are you crying?' asked the other desperately, and finding, as she thought, a sudden opening in the girl's appearance.

Mrs. Williams shivered and bit her lip.

'I am crying because my father is ill,' replied Asta.

Amy Williams paused for a moment. Was this true? and, whether it was or not, dare she, before her mother, proceed with this ill-bred cross-examination? For Asta Steele's feelings she was not concerned; but how if her father heard of this atrocious behaviour?

Ah! what did she care? Someone should be miserable; she was miserable enough—she would not suffer alone. This headache, this nausea, the monotony of this aimless existence of a country girl, the hateful dreams that tormented her by night, the selfishness born of anaemia and hysteria, and, part of these diseases, that inert indifference to others—that dwelling on self—were breaking down in her brain the barrier between mere unkind wilfulness and mania. She had never, since she had been ailing, seen things in their just proportions, and now, after a keen look at the suffering and shame expressed in her mother's pale face, she said:—

'Then, do you mean it is not Mr. Safford you are crying about?'

Mrs. Williams broke the stillness following this question with a cry of resentment and disgust.

As a stranger to some outlandish country might view every action of the natives as a barbarism, finding no one thing more startling than another, so this vulgar questioning, which was agonizing Mrs. Williams, seemed to Asta Steele only part of the ordinary behaviour of these people. They were always rude and unkind in action and speech. Mrs. Williams herself, though she would never have descended to the depths of her daughter's present action, had, none the less, always unkindly avoided the Steeles, and had been obviously and designedly cold to them when they met, with the intention of stifling any approach to intimacy between her own family and that of the Vicar of Borth. Yes, they were unchristian, bad people, and she was not more startled now by the mad questioning of this half-distraught girl than she had been by anything else in her past behaviour.

'I do not see on what account I should cry for Mr. Safford,' she replied coldly. 'If I were to be forced to marry Mr. Safford, then there would be an occasion truly for tears; but I will not—no!'

'Then he has asked you?' said the other, with almost anguish in her tone, and clasping tightly together her blunt-fingered white hands.

'Without doubt, many times. What other meaning have my words?'

'You say that your father is ill?' interposed Mrs. Williams, anxious to break through this, to her, in-

supportable conversation. ‘I am so sorry to hear it. What is the matter?’

‘It is pneumonia.’

‘Pneumonia! Dear me! and in this mild weather? How did he get it?’

‘He got wet, leaving the dance at Chatham last night.’

‘We heard you were going, and that Colonel Skene had invited you. Mrs. Paton told us. Mamma would not have allowed us to go as his guests.’

‘Amy! Amy!’

‘Well, mamma, you know perfectly well all about Mrs. Donnithorne—everyone knows it.’

‘My dear,’ said the exasperated Mrs. Williams, ‘I cannot imagine what the world is coming to! To think of young girls knowing such things, and, worse still, saying them! Dear me! I was fifty before I had heard things which with the girls of the present day are subjects of general conversation; and the horrible part of it is that it is my own daughters who have taught me all the harm I know, and I have got on so well all those years without the knowledge. Till you two girls grew up I knew nothing, and now the place seems teeming with wrong.’

Asta Steele, anxious to escape from these people, was playing uneasily with the imitation jade handle of Mrs. Case’s parasol, and took in the three disturbed women in a look that was obviously ingenuous and utterly sorrowful.

‘It is strange,’ she observed, ‘how a person can become fifty long years old and yet think these things.

I had only been taught your religion two months when I saw that scarcely anyone is doing what it bids him—no, not even its priests—and that Sunday after Sunday they prostrate themselves before your altars, swearing to God they will do this and that; then they do not do it. Sometimes, in winter, I have thought, when the terrible storms came, that God was sending them a sign, and Judith says—'

'I do not think we are concerned to hear what Judith says,' interrupted Mrs. Williams bitterly—'an ignorant, ill-conducted heathen! You are too much with her, Miss Steele; it is one of the many misguided actions of your father to allow it.'

A curious flicker came into Asta Steele's eyes. She saw for a moment only the pale faces of the three women: the younger girl's neat, meaningless features, her cold, soft, blue eyes, dark underneath, the white blouse tightly belted over the flat waist; Mrs. Williams's wrinkled, worn face, set into its prim but determined expression by the guarded thought of years in one narrow groove; the elder sister's look of displeasure.

She disliked them infinitely. And now they were speaking of her father—yes, and reviling him. Her nostrils dilated, and the two devils which from the moment she had entered this house had sat watching in her eyes were roused. It was partly a racial feeling; far back in the dead past the men now dust, but once her father's fathers, had fought against and hated the Whites, and their blood had been against

the white men's blood, and the same feeling now stirred in the girl's heart. . . .

Was it fancy? Had not the elder woman looked very pale as Asta turned on her and began speaking in a hoarse undertone, with that little clip in the words?

Now, as Asta returned home over the powdery roads, she recalled three very white faces, and recollected that the elder woman, looking at her with an expression almost of fear, had begged her to go. What had she said? Ah! a great many things. And now, having almost annihilated the Williams family, her little dusty shoes were once more on the road homeward, and the back of the oddly-worn sailor hat, set on her head like a nimbus, was turned toward their Vicarage.

But in the Vicarage the girls and their mother sat with altered faces. Amy Williams sat biting her nails and gazing after Asta's retreating figure.

'I hope you are satisfied,' said Mrs. Williams wearily to her.

'Satisfied! there is nothing to be satisfied about,' she replied. 'What the wretch said was only too miserably true. True enough, we are a swindle—you and I and the others—and I have been brought up on lies. It is a lie to insist on it that girls like their lives, and their twopenny accomplishments, and dress-making. You lie to yourselves and to each other, and you force us to lie, too, or be disgraced. You crush all the nature in us, and you try to pretend it isn't there, but it is. You pretend to each

other and to us that we are just what you and our ridiculous bringing up have made us, but we are not quite that, after all. No! I could tell you a good deal. . . . You tell us that men appreciate women for being good, and that's another lie. What about the ballet-girls who marry peers? What about the fuss that is made of Tottie Garnier now she is married to Lord Attenmore? Moreover, though you and everyone else know about Mrs. Donnithorne, you have her to your houses, and is there a single woman in the place who wouldn't be glad to marry her daughter to Colonel Skene when he drops her? You make it perfectly evident to us that everything of that sort is tolerated, and even admired, and you try to force us to think it isn't and to act as if it wasn't. Well, you don't succeed—even this half-nigger girl knows better than that !'

'I know nothing *definite* against Mrs. Donnithorne,' said Mrs. Williams feebly. 'Colonel Skene may enjoy her conversation, and they may have interests in common; and the same by the other married ladies whom you have always thought ill of and their male friends—a community of interests may lead them—'

'A community of desires, you mean! You can say what you like, but I am sure you know all about it—know exactly, in plain English, what the relations of Mrs. Donnithorne and one or two others are—and the fact is, you don't care one button, though you'd say you did.'

There was a pause. Mrs. Williams sat trembling.

unable with her shaking hands to get the needle through the calico she was sewing, pained, anguished beyond expression, unable to find a voice to stem this torrent of hideous talk which she felt was stopping her heart.

'Another unjust thing you do,' continued the girl; 'you give the brothers money to spend and live their lives with, and put them in the way of happiness, and none to us; and we sit at home making blouses at $5\frac{3}{4}$ d. the yard! I'll make no more of the confounded things!'

At the word 'confounded' Mrs. Williams burst into tears. She had heard those tirades against everything she considered right—those bitter words, in which the girl had pointed out the hateful, half-hidden things of human nature, the brutalities of life that are always kept partly covered, the desire of one base clay for another, the delight in what was entirely vile; she had listened in the consternation of a shocked surprise to those sordid, mean sentences in which her carefully-brought-up daughter had envied the stray pieces of luck snatched by courtesans from the chances of their reckless lives—the miserable triumphs of the gutter of life in sometimes reaching and fouling the spring. . . .

'How dare you use such a low word!' she said piteously. 'Where do you hear such language? I am sure such things never pass your father's lips or mine. What is happening to you I cannot tell. A year ago——' She stopped short, weeping.

'A year ago! A year ago I hadn't got so tired of

the whole thing, and hadn't found how rotten it was. You shouldn't have drilled me into a life that has no inside to it. It's like a beastly, make-believe dinner that children play at—bits of paper for plates and nutshells for food, and one has to pretend to eat and smack one's lips over it. Well, I'm not a child any longer—I won't do it !'

' All this because Mr. Safford loves that wretched girl and doesn't love you. Is it my fault ?'

' I don't say it is ; but I know what I mean, all the same. And this life you have trained me into is a failure, and I must try some other.'

' And may I ask what life you will find better ?'

' I don't know,' muttered the girl, biting her nails and listlessly kicking at the discarded needlework at her feet ; ' I'll chuck this, anyhow !'

At the word ' chuck,' Mrs. Williams buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

CHAPTER XVII

IN the darkness the Vicarage lay very still, but for the figures that crept about it weeping. There were lights in all the windows, and, till half an hour ago, there had been lights outside where the doctor's cart waited ; but those two lamps had driven off.

Sitting at an escritoire in the dining-room, Mrs. Case was writing. A number of envelopes lay beside her, addressed in her neat handwriting ; the light from the lamp fell on her colourless face and long-waisted figure, and on the frilling in her sleeves, edged with white beads.

She was writing to inform her relatives of the death of her brother-in-law. It would be selfish, she considered, to put off the relation of such news ; and it was, moreover, a thing that had always been done in her family. She was writing just now to her only near relation, a bachelor brother in Glasgow.

‘ What poor Asta will do now, I cannot think ; but I suppose nursing, or some opening of the sort, will be found. It must, for, of course, we shall be obliged to turn out of this Vicarage at once, and, though I have enough to keep myself, neither I nor any of my people have enough to keep her. Judith will now find her own footing, and will have to work.

She won't, when she comes to earn her own living, find she can attend as many balls as she did with us—disgraceful creature! The night poor Robert was taken ill, I hear that she and a married man—Joseph Stubbs—took out a horse belonging to Mr. Simpson at the post-office, and went out for a moonlight drive. They lamed the horse, a valuable beast, and smashed the cart to pieces; and the wretch returned with what in any *white* person would have been a black eye! And this is Asta's constant companion and confidante! Poor Robert, though he used to give the creature his mind, saw no real harm in her. Ah well, poor fellow! he is gone now. Our poor sister was spared much in her early death. I do not think she could have borne this life and this household; and, poor soul! could she but look down from above, and hear the things her daughter says, she would be inexpressibly grieved. Well, Andrew, *I* have done *my* best, and I must leave it now; I have nothing to reproach myself with. There is a very old-fashioned but well-made military washstand here—a remnant of poor R.'s army life—and I was thinking whether you could do with it; yours, I know, is broken. This comes to pieces for travelling; it would fetch nothing at a sale, for civilians do not understand things all in bits; and there is an old military sideboard, which is difficult to put together; it is like a puzzle; once up and on its rollers, it is a neat-looking thing; but that, again, a civilian, unless *told*, wouldn't understand, nor yet admire it. I would put a price on them for you, if you like, for it would all help poor Asta, and

I know what auctions are ; I fear the things will realize nothing, and we must scrape together something for the girl.

‘ Poor Robert, when he came here, laid down some wine—port and claret—I forget what vintage ; and you know how badly people here have treated him, so that no one has helped to drink it. I find to-day every bottle empty—Judith, I haven’t a doubt ! The raspberry cordial I made two dozen of last summer is quite safe ; nor has a cork been touched of the elderberry and ginger—these blacks have no religion—nothing to lean on ! I have noticed that her manner has been excitable at times ; this is the sequel ! I do not know whether, another year, I shall subscribe to the Zanzibar Mission ; in the face of what I see of Judith, it seems hopeless.

‘ I mustn’t write more now, I have so many business matters to see to. Tell me what you think as to the articles I mentioned ; I do believe you’d like them. The military sideboard, you must tell your servant, won’t stand rough dusting, nor yet heavy things on it ; but, if no one leans on it or falls against it, it does well, and keeps together well, once jammed together and on its rollers.’

Mrs. Case paused, and looked reflectively into space with her pale eyes. She was mentally reviewing the poor old furniture of the Vicarage, and calculating what money it would fetch for Asta ; the place had been very barely and poorly furnished. She recalled how Asta, on the one or two occasions

of those ill-assorted, mixed gatherings which the poor Vicar had given, had decorated the rooms with quantities of flowers. It was like her, reflected her aunt ; she could do nothing useful.

At this point the door opened, and the head of Asta's retainer looked in.

' I fought Miss Asta here,' said Judith, preparing to withdraw.

' I do not know where she is,' said Mrs. Case. ' Stop a moment, Judith—I want to speak to you. I want you to use your influence with Miss Asta to get her to control her grief and make some definite plan. Miss Asta, you know, will have to do something now. Has she told you what she would wish to do ? She says nothing to me. You, of course, will get back home to St. Lucia.'

' Me git back ?' said the negress, coming forward into the room, and speaking with an air of blank surprise.

' Certainly. I have been thinking it out : you can return as nurse to some lady's children, or work your way out as stewardess.'

Judith gave a sullen look out of her eyes.

' Dis don't suit me ideas,' she observed. ' What about Miss Asta ?'

' Miss Asta has nothing to do with you ; the sooner you understand that the better.'

' Dis take some time gittin' in me wool,' observed the woman, ' and it ain't dere yet. Dis a new idea dat Asta ain't anyfing to me ! I'se took care of dat chile since she was dat high ; I'se nussed dat chile

through she's whoopin'-cough and measles, through
she's scarlick fever, de bronchitis, de——'

'Never mind the list,' replied Mrs. Case wearily,
'but don't you see that you can't keep with her now?
How do you propose to do it? If, for instance, she
becomes a nurse, she will have to live at a hospital.
Well, where will you be, and how will you live?'

'Same like I did here,' observed the negress placidly
and pleasantly; 'I'se be somewhere around.'

'Somewhere around!' echoed Mrs. Cave, with
exasperation. 'You are a terrible person to deal
with. You know nothing of anything; you've seen
nothing but St. Lucia and this village. Where are
you going to live? and where will you get your food,
and who will pay for it?'

'Miss Asta and me don't eat more'n two flies,'
replied the woman hopefully.

'You are very exasperating, that's all I know,'
said Mrs. Case, 'with your "two flies!" You've
got to sleep somewhere, flies or not, and lodgings
have to be paid for. You'll just get back to St.
Lucia, whether you like it or not. I won't have
you about with Miss Asta, once for all—mind that!
You ought to have been sent home before this, and
now back you go. You've been hurting Miss Asta
with your goings on. I've just heard of your last
Monday's doings from Mr. Simpson—a nice story!'

'Mr. Simpson tell yo' dat? Perhaps Mr. Simpson
waste so much breff on dat subject dat he don't
have none left to tell yo' how he steam de letters
at de pos'-office and reads deir insides—tee hee!

Mr. Simpson better mind. He ain't no great shakes he'self—tee hee! I don't care dat for Mr. Simpson!

' You are a nice set,' observed Mrs. Case. ' Go now, but mind what I say.'

Upstairs, Asta had just left the chamber where her father lay, and having gained her own room, had thrown herself on her bed in the torpor of anguish. There was no help for her now, she knew, no longer a friend in the world. She could not think very distinctly—the mist of a great horror was over her brain, and from this mist incidents kept falling down into her mind like the specks in a kaleidoscope, and took a hideous proportion not their own. Now she thought of things her father had said to her on those lonely country walks of theirs, then of his pleasant salutations in return to the stiff bows of people whom they met. She called to mind his belief in himself, his unwillingness to recognise slights, his kindness to herself and to others, and now he lay there—dead! She had shuddered and trembled at the coldness of his face when she had kissed him. So this was the end—was it the end? With eyes straining into space she thought of all he had told her.

Was he wandering now in those fields of bliss where no unhappiness could come—he and Aunt Melanie and Julie? If he were, then the inner part of him—that thing he called the soul—must have slipped out of the dear clay and gone up to heaven, leaving behind merely the death-cold, shocking likeness of her father. Clay—yes, he had always said

that our bodies were mere clay, and it seemed like it. The touch—the immovable cold of what lay there and had made the heart stand still—had had the chill of earth upon it. She thought of the glass of champagne he had wanted at the ball and had never had, and tortured herself with thinking of it. He would never be thirsty any more. Papa had thought well of everyone—he had believed in everyone; above all, he had believed in this religion; it had played him false a hundred times as its followers—these hateful people—had done, and yet he had died with it on his lips.

In the absolutely clear, half-savage manner of a child, Asta reflected on these things. Why had this superior Power not attended to those frantic anguished prayers of hers, in which she had promised to serve It her whole life if It would serve her now? She had besought It in frenzied terms to save her father, who was Its servant. Poor papa also had begged It to spare his life. In what, then, was this Being superior to Judith's Obi? Then she thought again of the form in that room above.

All was over, all done with now—what mattered all else?

A light, soft air came in at the window; the night was warm, the room was almost in darkness, lighted only by the subdued light of stars.

Asta lay still, thinking. No, there was no power in this faith except for evil. In the half-darkness she saw the glimmer of the mantelpiece, and she remembered that the mended cross lay there. She

stumbled to her feet and groped her way across to it.

It was lying where she had knelt to it when she had appealed to it for her father's life.

She took it in her hand and crept with it to the open window. Sobs shook her, and for a moment she leaned on the window-sill in a frenzy of grief; then, leaning out and raising her arm, she threw the cross out into the night.

PART THE SECOND

CHAPTER XVIII

COLONEL SKENE's door was 108 at Frascati's at Havre, and next door to him was the woman whose skirts were lined with rose-colour.

Every time he came up or down there was the slight excitement afforded by the possibility of meeting this pretty woman, and even the thought of a chance encounter gave him the sensation that is evoked by a perfume or a warm day in spring. He had only met her once, for she did not come down to *table d'hôte*. This morning something had reminded Colonel Skene of her, and he had asked the waiter who she was.

Ah, that he didn't know.

Was she married?

Ah, that again he didn't know. Many came here who went on to Trouville—'many of these ladies who do not attach themselves much. Perhaps—'

After this mysterious reflection on the part of the waiter, Colonel Skene fell to looking at the end of his cigar; it was a good one. Life, on the whole, was pleasant. The waiter, certainly, had refused to let him have his breakfast on this lovely terrace looking on the sea. That was annoying to him,

but the proprietor, when summoned, had explained at length that all would demand their 'brekfisses' by the sea if he were once weak enough to yield. Then he had talked on about Trouville, and advised him as to hotels.

Colonel Skene, two months ago, had been invalided home from India; he had had very careful nursing from his sisters, and was now travelling with one of them to look after him. The hideous weakness had nearly left him, but he shuddered when he thought of the voyage home from India, so like a frightful dream, the steward propping him up with cushions at table—all that, thank God! was over. Now, to-day, a cool grey sea spread out before him, dotted over with the brown sails of fishing-boats; at his left lay on the water, like a dark blue cloud, Trouville, whither he hoped to go.

The hotel terrace rose just above the sea beach, and, leaning on its balustrade, he looked over. One or two loungers sat about; French children, with bare brown arms and carefully-gloved hands, played on the seashore, watched by their nurses; a couple of Belgian gentlemen, wearing foreign-looking straw hats with large bows at the side, walked past the hotel. At one time he would have enjoyed a sail on such a morning as this, but he was still, he felt, not strong enough; besides, Carrie wouldn't care for it. As he idly watched the scene he could see her approaching along the beach, her Baedeker under her arm; he recognised her boat-shaped hat and grey frieze coat and skirt. She came up the little, sloping

path leading from the seashore to the terrace of Frascati's.

She was a fair-haired, middle-aged woman ; her cheeks had a fresh, healthy colour, and the downy, fury look which is almost peculiar to the English country lady addicted to open-air pursuits. She wore the short skirt of the English countrywoman, well-made English boots, and a grey and white striped petticoat.

‘Well, Carrie !’

‘Well, George ! How are you feeling after your breakfast ? Did the waiter let you have it here ? No ? Ah, well, against the rules, I suppose.’

She wore a veil, stretched tightly over the upper part of her face to keep her hair tidy, and now, turning it up over her hat, looked pleasantly and happily about her with her middle-aged, innocent blue eyes.

‘My dear,’ she observed pleasantly, ‘I wish more than ever that I had joined that French conversation class that Adelaide Weston and some others started last year. It would be so nice to know what these people are talking about ; their conversation appears so animated and interesting. Now, I wonder what those two waiters are saying.’

‘I don’t suppose you would find their conversation particularly exhilarating,’ observed Skene.

‘No, George ; but everything abroad always strikes one as so new and fresh, and an intimate knowledge of the language of the people is a great help.’

'Where have you been off to so early this morning with your Baedeker?' asked her brother.

'Well, dear, knowing that men like a quiet smoke and rest after meals, and that you are not too strong, I went off to see the principal streets.'

'Ah! and did you like them?'

'Well, yes; they are business streets, but very, very interesting. Oh, dear me!—yes, everything is interesting, and I have an idea for this afternoon.'

Miss Skene had taken off her dog-skin gloves to open her book. An amethyst, rimmed with pearls, gave her pretty white hands an old-world look.

'This is it, George,' said she:—"The Norman church of Granville, two miles on the Rouen road (see above) is worth a visit from the architect. It may be conveniently reached by the local railway from Havre to Honfleur and Montevilliers (see above). Eleven trains daily."

'My dear Carrie, it may be worth a visit from the architect, but is it from the invalid?—and that is the profession I belong to just now.'

'George, dear, of course, if it would tire you, we won't go; I am so apt to forget—'

'But you go and see it, Carrie.'

'No, no, I wouldn't leave you alone; that would be hard.'

Colonel Skene would not have thought it hard at all; he would have enjoyed being alone. Carrie was a dear woman, but she chattered so, and he now replied:—

'Nonsense! it wouldn't at all. Who were those

people you were talking to in the drawing-room last night—an English mother and daughters? Couldn't you go with them ?'

' I suggested it to them, dear—in fact, our all going in a char-à-banc; but they had done it already.'

' Gracious ! But I understood they had only that morning arrived. What activity !'

' My dear, you are an invalid,' said she, with an indulgent smile. ' I'll just go and get my work; I'll be back in a moment. What a lovely day, to be sure !'

When she returned, her brother was sitting just where she had left him, but was listlessly cutting the pages of a French novel, and looking at the illustrations. He looked up at her with a smile.

' Is that hearthrug travelling about all over the Continent with us ?' he asked, glancing at her work, consisting of an enormous oblong of canvas, into which, with a crochet-needle, she was hooking strands of coarse thrums.

' My dear '—indulgently—' of course it is. Why ? Do you wish it to be left behind ? My dear George, you will soon be feeling quite well, and will be able to enjoy ordinary pleasures.'

' Do you speak of that terrible, hot-looking mass of worsted as an ordinary pleasure ?'

' There, there, dear, then I won't do it !' said his sister. ' It's only that it is for the Christ Church Bazaar, and I haven't too much time.'

She rolled the work into an enormous bundle, and

laid it aside, and then sat with her hands on her lap, looking placidly and cheerfully out on the sea with almost a smile on her lips. The sun showed up the pink colour in her cheeks, and the white down from ear to chin.

'I wonder,' she said presently, 'if there is anything here to do that would amuse you. I wish we could find something that would interest without tiring you.'

Colonel Skene remained silent. With the beginning of a return to health had come a longing for amusement; but what was there to do at Havre? He had come here intending to cross over with his sister to Trouville, but he was undecided now if he should go—whether he was well enough to enter into the amusements there, whether it was worth while for a semi-invalid to pay a fortnight's bill at the Roches-Noires. Then he listlessly wondered what the pretty woman upstairs, in the room next his own, did to amuse herself. If she would only come down, so that one could look at her pretty clothes!

Miss Skene's voice broke his reverie:—

'My dear, did you notice a couple sitting in a line with us, four away from us on our right, at the *table d'hôte* last night—a large, stout woman, with hair combed up off her face, and a husband with— You know the people? My dear, she's dressing at her window now. Don't look!'

'You need not warn me, Carrie; I have no intention of looking. I don't think hers is a toilet one would linger over much. Why the Almighty created

such women I can't imagine ! What were you going to say about her ?'

' Only this, that she and her husband puzzle me. I can't make out whether that child *is* theirs ! there's something odd about it all ! They seem fond of it, poor little mite ! but I am sure it is most injudicious of them to allow it to go through all the courses at dinner ; and I heard, as I was passing, their *bonne* saying : " You know the child is not safe with her !" Now, what did that mean ?'

' I cannot imagine,' replied Skene listlessly, and stifling a yawn, ' unless she meant that if the woman trod on the child, or sat on it by accident, it would be fatal. You always find out such extraordinary things about people. Now, I should have thought them most commonplace folk.'

Miss Skene made no reply, but with her usual happy, placid expression, gazed about her at the sky, the beach, the hotel, the other loungers on the terrace, looking with interested enjoyment at everything.

' I had my *café complet* quite early this morning,' she said presently. ' It is such a good plan if you want to get in a good day's sight-seeing.'

' No doubt.'

' And when you get stronger we will both have our *cafés complets* very early, and then we shall be able to do twice as much. I always regret so that you didn't see those Rubens' at Antwerp, all through being in bed at the time. It is quite a chance to find them uncovered at the Cathedral. By the way,

George, there is to be a dance here to-night at the Casino, I hear.'

' Is there ?'

' I should like to see what a Casino dance is like. If it is improper, I am far too old to suffer by it.'

' It will not be improper, I feel sure, if the ladies and gentlemen we meet at *table d'hôte* comprise the ball,' remarked Colonel Skene with a distressed yawn; ' they can be nothing more than dull.'

' Well, George, I only meant that in foreign places one cannot be too careful. But, then, also, we shall only be onlookers, so we cannot be introduced to undesirable persons, and if we went, I should wear a very quiet dress.'

' By dint of these precautions we shall doubtless escape.'

' But you, George, ought to dance. Come, now, it would brighten you up, for you are such a dancing man.'

' My dear Carrie, with whom, pray ? There's no one.'

' With whom ? Why, my dear, where were your eyes at dinner last night ?'

' Most probably on my plate ; the cooking here is better than anything else.'

' They must have been, for, sitting just opposite to you were a family—a mother and six girls, nice, sensible, fresh-looking English girls ; it was a treat to look at them !'

Skene turned to his lazy examination of the wood-cuts in his French work.

'I am afraid,' he said, 'that even that panorama of eligible youth doesn't tempt me. Very nice for those who like 'em. I don't.'

Miss Skene shook her head with a smile.

'Ah, George,' she said, 'it would be the best thing in the world for you if you would marry some nice, good girl. When you return to India, Anna and I will be simply distressed at your going out after this illness to an uncared-for bachelor life.'

Miss Skene was good as gold. No new views had sullied her mind. She knew that men—especially when, from one cause or another, their constitutions were thoroughly damaged—should marry nice women to take care of what remained of them. Many a time during her brother's illness had the dear, excellent woman had evidence of this fact—not that she had ever doubted it.

Colonel Skene laughed and shook his head. When, after lunch, he went upstairs to his room, he was not thinking of sensible English girls, but of the smartly-cut frock, lined with rose colour, which belonged to the lady in the room next to his. He had never had a good look at her face, but there had been the charming frou-frou of her silken petticoats, and a glimpse of ankles in little low-heeled boots—just then, with their affectation of simplicity, the latest thing in Paris, and a reaction from the high heels now relegated to the *demi-mondaines*. These pretty boots were the only thing that had interested him at Havre, and when Skene had reached his room without meeting his neighbour or hearing the

sound of her skirts, he experienced something like a slight irritation. He felt weak—the confounded hotel stairs tried him, and, above all, there was nothing to do. The boredom of a place where one has neither amusement nor occupation was telling on him. And then there was this fever, better now, certainly, but sometimes recurring, and leaving him jaded and listless.

These foreigners seemed always feeding, so that downstairs there would presently begin again the rattle of plates and knives and forks, as the waiters began to prepare for dinner. Then there would be the descent to the salon, and he and Carrie would sit there, while the fat foreign ladies and the foreign men with cropped heads filed in, and were served with the inevitable *poulet-au-cresson*, and the hard sweetmeats and biscuits that concluded the dinner.

He wished he could decide whether or not they should go over to Trouville ; it was this indecision which tied them to Havre. Certainly Trouville scarcely seemed the place for him in his present health ; yet some days he felt quite well. The least chill, however, brought back the fever and ague ; the least indiscretion in food was the signal for a relapse. Now, as he sat up in his room, because, if he went down, Carrie would probably want him to explore the old quarter of the town—confound old quarters ; they always stink !—or go out with the six girls in a char-à-banc, great Scot ! he thought of the dessert of which he had indiscreetly partaken the night before.

'It was that infernal melon,' he said; 'I have not felt well since.'

He did not move from his room, but lay in an armchair before the window, watching the clouds and feeling rather shaky and ill. There he stayed till half-past five o'clock, when Carrie came in, looking very alert and British in her boat-shaped hat, and with the veil, as usual, over the upper part of her face.

'My dear George, have you been here all the time?'

'Yes.'

'Not ill, dear, though you're not looking——?'

'Nothing much, only that confounded melon last night has upset me; it looked cool and fresh after the people at that *table d'hôte*.'

'George, I am sorry, but I think it was the pistachio ice. I must say I trembled when I saw you take a spoonful; I had a foreboding.'

'I wish, Carrie, you had mentioned it then or let me see you tremble.'

'My dear, you know men don't like being told of things! but with regard to ices I always remember what dear old Dr. Broughton says——'

But her brother had too often heard the doctor quoted, and now murmured:—

'Well, what does it matter whether it was the ice or the melon? Something has brought the fever back.' There was silence for awhile, and then he said: 'I hope I am not going to have any more of the ague; it leaves me so racked, and here, away

from home—— Can't they bring me something to eat up here? I can't go down.'

'Of course, dear, and I will dine here with you. You don't feel cold now, do you?'

'I don't feel warm—shivery, rather; you might throw that rug over my feet.'

Yes; these were moments, Miss Skene reflected, when undoubtedly George should be married, when he would have sitting beside him the sort of kind domestic woman whom in health he would never dream of spending half an hour with—some simple-hearted lady who, when he could no longer enjoy the society of the style of woman he did like, would look after him, carry round his cards at intervals, and be generally good and sympathetic. There was between this and the Donnithorne type the difference that there is between lavender water and otto of roses, the one a cool, clean, reputable thing; the other evoking memories of passion, of intrigue, of ball-room loves, of the scent of women's white fingers and of their charming hair.

'Suppose we take your temperature,' suggested Miss Skene; 'you go up so rapidly, you know, that it is a trying thing to be alone with you without our own doctor. If only Dr. Broughton——'

'Hand me my thermometer, Carrie; no doubt there is medical skill in Havre equal to Broughton's if we want it.'

While her brother was taking his temperature after dinner, Carrie withdrew from the room, and, after a little delay, returned with a small book. The sun

was going down, and the window curtains, instead of appearing the blaze of light which they had done all day, now showed their design of baskets of grapes against the cold blue of the sky. As she sat reading between him and the light, Colonel Skene could see the outline of his sister's face and the curve of her cheek with the down on it, like an exaggerated peach. He was in the stage when placid, homely things—the marigolds and lavenders of life—are restful, and Carrie was just such a placid, wholesome thing.

Poor Carrie! Her enthusiasm about sight-seeing, her accurate knowledge of her Baedeker, of every train and tram and boat, their prices and hours in every neighbourhood—he had always thought these things very funny; but now, as he watched her kindly face and robust form outlined against the sky, it suddenly occurred to him how very little in all her forty-two years poor Carrie had ever been given of real life or pleasure. Neither of his sisters had ever had a particularly good time, though they would have been the last to say so. They had always had plenty to eat and good humdrum society, and they were of the particular school of women which thinks that nothing that happens to a woman, short of actual ill-treatment, could or should be resented. Till now he had not realized what a zest poor Carrie had for amusement, and what a pleasure it was to her, guide-book in hand, to see the sights which only bored him, and which she only now saw as his nurse. Every evening notes were made in her diary

of things to tell Anna on her return, that not a scrap should be lost, and that her sister, too, should participate in this treat.

'Why were you not out with the English family this afternoon?' he asked suddenly. 'Where was it you were going? Somewhere, I know.'

'Well, George, I felt you were not very well, and so I pottered about the docks a little instead of making our expedition, and then came back to you. My dear'—as he began speaking—'I have seen plenty of interesting sights about the docks—the old part, you know; indeed, I assure you I am not sorry for a rest.'

'It was very good of you, Carrie. You are good to me; you were good to father, too. All through that long illness you were a brick.'

'My dear, I don't see it; I have only been trying to do my duty.'

Yes; that was what she had been doing, and her duty had been a wearing, prosaic thing. Duty is seldom becoming to women; it brings them up at early hours and out in stormy weather; it takes its devotees long walks, and often prevents them from taking a cab; it makes them hot in summer and cold in winter; it bows the figure and wrinkles the face.

Like some poor rose pressed in a Bible, nothing now remained of Carrie Skene's good looks. This face suggested no memories of past hopes which she had cherished, of dead illusions, of faded dreams; she was merely someone whom one would turn to

in distress or anxiety, whom one liked when one was ill.

'What are you reading?' asked her brother presently.

'I was just studying a French conversation book in case a doctor should become necessary. I have found a conversation with a doctor, but unfortunately the patient is describing consumption, and at every fresh symptom the doctor exclaims: "*Les poumons—les poumons!*!" It is very unfortunate.'

Carrie Skene had closed her book, and was evidently thinking very intently. Presently she said:—

'You are not feeling very ill now, are you?'

'No. Why?'

'It is only that I wanted to tell you something very interesting that happened just now when I left your room to fetch this book, only I don't want to excite you. Well, just outside the door I met that pretty woman whose room is next yours, you know, and she spoke to me. She speaks English, and is, I think, charming.'

'What did she say?'

'Only about the weather at first; but, finding she spoke English, I went on to ask if she knew of an English doctor here. She didn't; but—this is the curious part—she knows you. Fancy! how small the world is!'

'She knows me?' exclaimed Skene, sitting up, his brown face flushed. 'The deuce she does!'

'Yes, and she says you should be more careful,

and if you have fever about you, as I told her you had, should certainly not have been sitting out last night. I said I thought so, too, but that she knew what men were—they didn't like to be told things.'

'Ah!'

'And she said she did know them very well indeed.'

'No doubt; so I should judge. H'm! what may her name be?'

'When I asked her that, she said her name was Steele; she didn't say Miss or Mrs. Steele—only Steele.'

'It is impossible!'

'Why?'

'Why? Because the only living creature I ever knew of that name was a dear little, odd parson's daughter, whom I met two years ago when I was at Chatham. Her father was a West Indian, who had somehow got a living at a village near; but an odd, wild thing, as different from the style of this woman—not that I've ever really had a look at her face—as a poppy is from an orchid. This Miss Steele!'

'She may have married some rich man.'

'By George! yes. There was something about the child that any fellow might like to marry.'

'I wonder why *you* didn't, George!'

'Oh, I——' Skene waved his hand in the rather deprecating, vague way in which he always waved it when marriage—not in the abstract, for someone else, but as a personal possibility for himself—was suggested to him. 'I am not in that line of business—

not a marrying man at all,' he observed. ' Still, to return to our muttons, I don't think even a rich marriage could make such a change in a little— You should have seen her, Carrie! Why can't *I* see her, by the way ?'

' I dare say you can to-morrow, but the next day she leaves.'

' Alone ?'

' She didn't say.'

' H'm !'

There was silence for a while, and then Skene said :—

' I should like to see her. Can't I see her to-night if—'

At this moment there came a knocking at the door, and Miss Skene opened it.

' This is the lady we were talking about,' she said.

There was silence in the room when Asta Steele entered. She did not speak or even offer her hand, but stood gravely there, much as she had stood beside him in the old days, with that little air of sulkiness which he remembered.

She wore a bright theatre dress of some scarlet fabric ; a diamond gleamed from a huge scarlet bow under the brown, ivory tints of her face ; touches of steel glittered here and there in the scarlet of her dress, and when she moved lighted it with a quivering light. There was about her dress a fanciful extravagance of fashion ; she had the air of a woman who lives only to be beautiful, and dreams only of showing the world her beauty.

'You do not remember me,' she said presently; 'two years is a long time, and you saw me only a few times.'

'I remember you perfectly,' replied Skene.

She regarded him gravely and earnestly for a moment, and then, turning to Miss Skene, said:—

'But I have come to say something. Look! I have these tickets to go and hear Elsa Rejart to-night, but suddenly I feel indisposed to go; will you have them, Miss Skene? I have heard her; she is worth hearing, and she is not always to be heard. Therefore——'

'How kind of you!' said Carrie Skene—'how very kind of you!'

Elsa Rejart!—Miss Skene's eyes gleamed. The fame of the lady who sang French *chansons* of a more or less questionable order was world-wide. Once, when she had been performing in London, Anna and she had been in town; but Elsa had been then singing at the Empire, and there they felt they could not follow her.

'How very good of you!' said she again. 'But, George, do you feel well enough?'

'You could get some lady from the hotel to accompany you, or you can take my maid,' interposed Asta Steele.

'That would be best,' suggested Skene. 'Why not ask one of the six girls? My dear Carrie, don't trouble about me; I shall be all right.'

'I have been a nurse,' said Asta; 'if he is ill, he shall call me. If you dress at once, you will

be in time. Here are the tickets ;' and Miss Skene ran downstairs to find a companion for the evening.

Asta Steele looked round the sitting-room, and then looked long in her companion's face, and made a little move as if to go.

'The two years have changed you,' she murmured. 'You have been ill; but is it only your face that is changed? Are you the same? I wonder if you are.'

'I am the same,' replied Skene. 'No, do not go,' as she again moved towards the door—'*do not!*'

She shrugged her shoulders, and looked up in his face.

'Why should I stay?'

'Tell me,' asked Skene, without replying to this:—'what caprice moved you to come here to us?'

'I do not understand.'

'Yes, what caprice, since, now you are come, you seem to wish not to speak to me—not to revive our old friendship? Tell me—are you vexed with me still? Have you remembered my sins all through those long years? Is it not time that I should be forgiven? You stand there now in the same sulky fashion you had years ago, but there is some change in you. What is it?'

Silence. Below, someone in the salon was playing the piano; the notes, played with the crispness of a man's touch, came distinctly on the ear; footsteps sounded on the beach below, and the murmurs of children at play.

'When I came to see you after the ball, I thought you had forgiven me. I could not say much, for you were in such trouble; but I thought you were the same nice child, and that you had understood—'

'I had understood.'

'There is a second meaning to your words. I see in every look of yours now that you wish to go—well, so be it!'

'Good-bye!'

'Are you going?'

'You are ill, and should rest and sleep.'

'And sleep!' repeated Skene. 'Do you think you are a good preparation for sleep? Do men generally go placidly to sleep after seeing you? Well, I shall not sleep—you know it!'

A footstep came along the corridor and stopped at the door.

'I have got Miss Wallis to go with me,' said Miss Skene, entering smilingly. 'Indeed, it is so good of you to give me this opportunity. Have you been talking over old times, George? Dear me! what is the precise time? Should I start at once?'

'I think you should go now if you walk,' responded Asta. 'Your sister is very kind,' said she, when Carrie Skene's footsteps had died out.

'My sister is as good as gold,' replied Skene. 'She tells me, by the way, that you are leaving this place the day after to-morrow. Are you returning to England?'

'No, I go on to Trouville.'

'We thought of going there too.' He had come nearer to her. 'I am going to tell you something so odd,' he said: 'I am no longer ill; you seem to have driven my fever away; the perfume on your beautiful dress has done more for me than all the doctors in the world. But you keep me in fear lest you should go. You care nothing for me, yet I swear now, on my soul, that I have not seen a single woman since who attracted me as you did.'

'Did I attract you?' Asta had listlessly walked forward into the room, and stood looking out of the window.

'You know you did.'

'And what was the end?' she asked.

'The end—you know the end. I was a mere creature of impulse, dragged here and there, but I was infinitely more the loser in letting you out of my sight than you were in parting from me. You were a dear little child—something exquisite—the very soul and shape of what I wanted if I had wanted anything. But there it is; have I ever wanted anything? I have never felt sure enough of myself to ask any woman to marry me. I know I should tire, and what an end to romance! As a married man, what would my life be? I have seen too much of it. Look here! when you tell a woman you love her you are digging the grave of love, but when you marry her the grave is already dug and filled, and you are battening down the earth upon it. It is so, on my soul!'

'It may be so.'

'It is so,' he repeated, coming nearer to her and looking into her eyes.

'How is it,' she asked, frowning up in his face, 'that it is you who always force on me the cruel things of life? Two years ago you did so, and now Fate, and what you call my caprice, have led me into your path, and you tell me once again that joy is hollow, and that what I have always longed for would break into dust if I were to touch it. Well, it does not matter now; the world has taught it me also—the lesson is learned.'

'What have you been doing since that day we said good-bye?' he asked.

'What do you imagine I have been doing? Do you think that a woman, thrown, as I was, without money on her own resources, can do anything very amusing? What do you imagine I did?'

'How can I tell?' murmured Skene.

He had formed in his own mind no theory of how this charming, new Asta Steele had been reincarnated, how she had come here, nor what she had existed on in the interval.

'Do you think being a governess amusing?'

'Have you been one?'

'Yes.'

'And you don't like it?'

'I did not like it,' said Asta, with the little half-ferocious air that Skene remembered. 'No, I hated it very, very much. Do you think you would like it?'

Skene could not imagine himself as an instructress

of youth, but he felt vaguely that such a profession would result neither in pleasure to himself nor in profit to his pupils.

'Governesses?' said the girl, sitting down in a basket-chair and arranging the scarlet bow under her chin—'governesses? Ah, yes, don't speak of them! People are shocked when a girl goes on the stage because she sees the vices of life; they speak as if vice was only of one sort. Well, there are many. You and others see the world's stage from the front of the theatre; but if you are a woman in a dependent position, you are not in the front at all, you never reach it, and you do not see anything even as good as the world's vices: you are permitted to see only its brutalities. You are in the dirty dressing-rooms at the back, for that is where the women who behave well and are poor have to stay.'

She shrugged her shoulders, and taking out of her pocket a little tortoise-shell case, offered him a cigarette and lighted one herself. She seemed now to have changed her mind about going, for she stepped lightly through the window and on to the little balcony outside, and, leaning on the rail, turned her head and looked back into his eyes.

'Did you know Captain Bry-son?' she asked, with the little foreign division of the syllables.

'Yes, I knew Bry-son,' said Skene tenderly, imitating her accent and her struggle with the 'r.' 'The Adjutant of the 4th, you mean?'

'I hated Bry-son,' she said.

'I didn't care about him, but I knew very little of him. Why did you hate him?'

'Merely that I was governess at his house, and Bry-son proves what I mean. Bry-son, you say, you did not care much about. You saw him from the front of the stage; I saw him from the back, and quite close.'

'I don't think he would look well from any part of the theatre,' responded Skene.

'It was a dreadful house to live in; they were both very unkind; the children were bad and cruel children—ah, yes, I longed to box their ears! I did box them, and was dismissed. I then went to another family—Colonel Black's—and— Well, I boxed *their* ears.'

'What—old Black of the Engineers? You seem to have done a good deal of ear-boxing,' observed Colonel Skene.

'Then,' continued the girl, 'I went to another family.'

'Did you box their ears?'

'No; they boxed mine—or, rather, the lady thought her husband was falling in love with me and dismissed me.'

'I have no doubt he was.'

'Well, perhaps so. And then—but do you care to hear all this?—I tried nursing.'

'Nursing,' said Skene in a comfortable voice—'nursing. Well, that is a noble profession! Come, you liked that?'

'How fond men are of suggesting that other

people, particularly women, should be noble ! Well, it *is* noble ; but my health broke down, and I had to drop it. If I had continued it, I should not be here —the doctors said so.'

'I am glad you did not continue it.'

'I then went on the stage—I was not strong enough. Then I returned to governessing, and now I am here.'

'But for a very short time. The day after tomorrow you leave, you say, for Trouville ?'

'Yes.'

'Shall you be returning to London shortly ?'

'My plans are not certain.'

'But everyone returns sooner or later to London.'

'Do they ?'

'Well, yes—dear old London !—everyone has some link with it. One cannot go along the street without meeting some friend of the past or present.'

'That is not always an advantage.'

'I can answer for it that it will always be an advantage to me to see you. When shall I see you again ? Look here, I shall go on to Trouville—we shall meet there.'

'We shall not—we shall never meet there ! You must say good-bye to me to-night.'

'I do not understand you,' said Skene ; 'you are full of mystery. Why may I not meet you again ? Why good-bye ? If you no longer care to see me, why did you renew your acquaintance with me ? I didn't force myself on you—I didn't recognise you, even.'

'There is not time to-night to explain all this,' said the girl wearily. 'As for renewing our acquaintance, it was a mere caprice.'

'It is not very late,' said Skene—'half-past nine only. My sister won't be home for a long time.'

'I am not afraid of that; if she did, she would not find me here. Judith is watching for me; she watches, not for your sister, but for someone else. It would not do to be found here, and someone may arrive at any moment.'

A shade of emotion passed over Skene's face.

'Now you are more explicit,' said he. And then, after a pause, he added:—'So you have your old Judith with you?'

She nodded an affirmative, and, leaning forward on the stone balcony, looked out. A light, cool wind blew in from the sea, bearing with it a scent of brine and seaweed. The savour of the sea and its dark expanse, reaching to the horizon, the sound of the murmur of its approach on the pebbles below, its infinitely sad withdrawal in defeat, seemed to Skene to be part of the nature of this woman whom Fate had thrown once more in his path, and created an excitement in his blood. Why had this strange, dusky face arisen from the dust of centuries of dead loves to touch his senses as no woman's face had done before? Why had the thousand chances of life thrown her again in his path? The scarlet sash she wore round her slender shape blew against his fingers. At that moment he loved her.

'There!' she cried, throwing her cigarette out into the night; 'it is finished.'

The tiny red fire flashed through the darkness and fell on the beach below. Leaning so close to her that his arm pressed hers, he looked down.

'Can you see the spark still?' he asked.

They leaned forward and watched it, and, as it died out, she turned her head and looked in his eyes. He leaned closer to her, and kissed her on the mouth. Her lips returned the kiss, and then a little sound like a sob escaped her and mixed with the murmur of the sea. A pale flash of lightning lit up the skies for a moment and showed their troubled eyes to each other. Leaning, then, with his arm round her on the balcony and looking into the night, a strange happiness possessed him and an overwhelming sense of trouble. His happiness was like those melodies which, joyful in themselves, have an underlying note of sadness. Through the conflicting emotions of his mind, one thought was over all—he must possess Asta Steele. On this star-lit balcony, alone with the glamour of the sea, in the tropical heat of the close night, and shut in with the scented darkness, they were to him the only two lovers in the world. His regiment, his life, India, his friends—he was not thinking of them—he did not even think distinctly of himself and Asta. She had come back to him; she should not go away again. What had he made of life? Had it been very desirable? Had he one very exquisite emotion to look back on? Surely a

life lived for self only should show something better than this record of careless pleasures.

He was aroused by a movement on the part of his companion ; she was rising from her chair.

‘ You are not going ?’ he said. ‘ No, no !’

‘ Yes ; it is late,’ said the girl. ‘ I have stayed too long already—too long.’

A sob broke the stillness.

‘ Why are you crying, my precious one ?’ asked Skene. ‘ Why are you so distressed ? You madden me by these tears.’

‘ Good-night,’ she said again. ‘ There has been no happiness for me in life, and I know there will be none. Say good-bye to-night. We part here.’

‘ We do not,’ said Skene—‘ I swear we will not. Listen, Asta. What are you doing here ? You have not said. There is a mystery about you. You said something just now about Judith watching for someone who may come to-night. Who is that someone ? Who is it who——’

A faint rapping was heard at the door.

‘ It is someone coming,’ said Asta. ‘ Quick ! let me go ! Good-bye.’

‘ You will meet me to-morrow ?’ whispered Skene ; but he only heard the rustle of her skirts and the closing of a door.

CHAPTER XIX

‘WHY did you rap, Judith?’ asked Asta, as she closed the door. ‘There was no one coming.’

The negress confronted her sulkily.

‘Because I fought yo’ spend time enough wiv officer Skene,’ she observed; ‘because I fink if yo’ not keerful yo’ land us bofe back in dem miserable, low-down rooms wiv nuffin’ to eat. Dis a very curious circumstance dat when yo’ has got hold ob somefin’ yo’ wants to drop it. I knew dis a very bad prognosis when I find de Colonel officer here; but I didn’t fink yo’ foolish enough to follow up dat track again—I fought yo’ got more sense. An de Colonel he’self, he curiously like dose ole times—jus’ de same ole rogue elephant.’

‘You’ve been listening at the door, Judith!’

‘I’se not been listenin’ at de door; I find yo’ hear much better from dis balcony, and I sits dere behime de wall and hear all de officer say; an’ dere ain’t much to hold to, Miss Asta, in what he say. Dis—“Don’t yo’ be distressed, my honey”—oh yes, dis sound very well, but it don’t keep yo’; yo’ don’t get nuffin’ at de shop de more for dat; it don’t fill de stomach nor it don’t buy yo’ a hat. “We will not part,” he says; but he don’t say what he goin’ to do for yo’, nor who pay yo’r bills. . . . Dis a black

business, dis Colonel bein' here. I'se glad de Duke come soon. But, Miss Asta, yo' hab a care. De Duke's man, Salvator, he perhaps talk to de hotel servants, and dose hotel servants say, "Ah yes, dis lady and de Colonel officer hab a great deal to say." Dat's why I don't want dis foolishness. Yo' look at dis Colonel, and den look at de Gran' Duke. Salvator tell me dat de Duke got twenty horses. Ah! an' how many hab de Colonel? One perhaps. De Gran' Duke got boar-hounds: one miserable dog de Colonel got, and dat hab a sore back through de Colonel not habbin' enough to feed dis animal. De Duke hab a house in Paris, anuver in Russia, and dis fine house at Trouville, where we go now if dis foolishness don't git to he's ears and give he de hump. De Bible done speak ob de foolish virgins dat don't light deir blime lamps, and yo' just such anuver.'

' You're very abusive to-night, Judith,' said Asta. ' You think you know everything, but you don't know everything. What if the Colonel were to marry me—what then ?'

' De Colonel don't say he want to marry; de Colonel say "love" and "precious," but he don't go into no future.'

' He was going into it when you interrupted us, when you rapped at the door to frighten me.'

' He was travellin' precious slow den.'

' Now, look here, Judith, once for all, you're not to interfere in my concerns. You seem to think you can say anything. As regards seeing the

Colonel, I shall do as I like. Why are you so set against him now? In Borth you said he was the finest gentleman there.'

'Dat quite possible in Borf, wivout strainin' he'self, but at dat time Gran' Dukes not buzzin' roun'. We didn't hab no Dukes at Borf. I don't hab no recollection ob de circumstances ob Gran' Dukes proposin' to us. Asta chol', I don't want to git back to dose contemptuous corp'rils, and besides, yo' mark my words, de Colonel don't mean marriage no more dan de Duke do. On de uver hand, what do Salvator say? He say twenty servants in dis villa at Trouville, and he say most ob dem go to de races on a carriage. He say de eatin' and drinkin' very fine. De French chef, so Salvator he say, don't care what he do, and don't care what he drink. He say Trouville a very free-livin' place, and de Duke he'self de gayest, finest gentleman dere.'

'And so you once said Colonel Skene was at Borth.'

'He don't got de Duke's style, and he don't got de Duke's experiaunces,' observed the negress severely; 'and I don't see dat Colonels, however disreputible, can be de same like Gran' Dukes. It ain't in deir natures no more'n a cat barks like a dog. Dey can't do it because dey ain't dogs, dat's de reason.'

'If you talk so loud, Judith, the Colonel will hear you; he certainly will if he's sitting in his open window. But I suppose you won't be content till you ruin me.'

'If de Colonel listen to dis here discourse, den he git more troof under his wool dan it was ebber outside ob before. Dis very different from his own shamblin' talk 'bout if yo' loves a woman yo' diggin' de grave ob love, and if yo' marries her yo' and she sittin' on de top and flattening de earf. Dis a nice skeery fing to say to a young female—a most indelicate observation! Moreover, Asta, yo' done forgit what's gone befo'; yo' done forgit dat lil room in London where I go out cookin' and yo' go out actin'; yo' done forgit how de actor man, one day when yo's ill, say to yo', "Yo don't hab de talents for dis actin'; don't yo' come no more." Yo' done forgit how de uver brassy feller say to me, he says: "Quit dis show; yo's spiled enough food ter pizon a regiment!" And why is dis? Dis because yo' don't hab de healf for de actin' an' I don't hab de experiaunces for de cookin'. Den yo' want ter lose de Gran' Duke. No, Miss Asta, I'se telled aunt dat I means to look after yo', an' I means to do it in style.'

'You know very well that aunt would be furious.'

A silence fell on the room. Judith lighted a candle, and, setting it on the table, busied herself with mending a skirt of Asta's. The woman's face was perturbed, and she glanced from time to time at her mistress. All had gone well till two years ago, when Asta had met the Colonel, and Judith now told herself that some untoward fate must surround her meetings with that officer; there was something evil in his influence, something baleful,

for had he ever appeared on the scene except to do Asta an ill service? At Borth he had arrived and doubtless prevented a marriage with Mr. Safford. He had afterwards, at a dance, reduced her child to tears and caused her on her return home to smash the fetish of the white people, an act which, quite obviously, had brought demons about the Vicarage. Could any sensible person doubt that those spirits had killed Mr. Steele in revenge, or that the whole course of events since had been a sequel, only to be expected from the demons of this Church of England when exasperated by insult? No one could doubt it—it was all too plain. That breaking of the cross, moreover, had placed Asta in the miserable position of having no fetish at all—no one to back her up—hence her ill-health and the ill-treatment she had experienced at the hands of her various employers, the Christians, so that it had required all Judith's cleverness at times to make matters even endurable. By dint, however, of care, they were now finding themselves in smoother water, and here, by some horrid jugglery of fate, was the Colonel once more, and meetings between her young mistress and him by moonlight which Judith well knew to be dangerous.

'De kyar like to go off de rails again if yo' don't hab a care, Judith,' she muttered to herself moodily, biting off a thread.

There was about the woman a philosophy which, if not very deep, was pretty shrewd, and was sound as far as it went. That it didn't go far was because

her brain-cells were not constructed that way. For thousands of years Judith's people had been content with the present; for thousands of years they had slept in the shade and giggled in the sun and rejoiced at trifles, and never in all those years had they looked ahead beyond the trivial and superficial things they loved—amusement and food—and never in all those years had they troubled about morals. In the old days at Borth, under the shadow of the Church of England, and close to the bustling, alert respectability of Mrs. Case and the neighbours, the slave feeling in Judith had been kept uppermost; she had done much as she liked with regard to her own conduct, but she had been forced to know that what the Whites did was better and the right thing, and she would never have dared to doubt that a White should do what he was ordered from the pulpit.

As Judith had observed to her mistress, owing to the scarcity of Grand Dukes at Borth, there had been little temptation to the villagers to live with them; none the less, the negress knew in her heart that, though well-cloaked immoralities might, here and there, be suffered to exist in the shadow of the steeple, an undraped liaison would not be tolerated.

But in Judith's mind herein lay the difference:—her young mistress had then been a believer in the Cross, and a worshipper in the Church of England. Its members did not sanction irregular connections; on the contrary, as Judith knew, unless a woman could,

as in Mrs. Donnithorne's case, throw a very smart mantle over her sins, and also give them something substantial to overlook them, they were apt to land very heavily on the wrongdoer ; in fact, they always did when the latter had neither influence nor cash. Judith, then, in Borth had seen exactly how the land lay, and, genuinely loving her mistress, had tried to induce her to marry Mr. Safford, and, failing this, had hoped that she would marry Skene.

Now, however, a different state of things surely called for different treatment. Asta, the negress told herself, was no longer a Christian ; she had broken and thrown away the cross ; her papa, who had, when alive, considerable influence with fetishes, was gone ; her aunt, a pillar of the Church of England, was separated from her ; the spirits belonging to that Church were dead against her, and obviously, by their conduct, were showing her as plainly as any spirits could, that they wished to have no more to do with her. Then, being no longer bound, why, reflected the woman, should not Asta take the really brilliant post offered to her ?

Behind the negress lay, like murky shadows, the immoralities of the whole Black race ; it seemed to the poor soul not only an expedient, but a brilliant career that her loved mistress was entering on. This open grave that lay before Asta, the woman in her ignorance was decking with flowers ; about the miserable, dark hole into which the poor child was creeping for rest, she strewed these flowers, just as in the old days at St. Lucia, when she had played with

her at making a house, she had strung together for her the blossoms of the jasmine and the striped four-o'clocks.

The nest she had made for her then had soon faded—the blossoms had drooped in an hour; but when they withered there was the outside world to come to. The negress did not know that there would be no outside world to return to from the Grand Duke's villa. Asta herself did not know this with certainty; but she was dimly aware of it, and shuddered, for she was very young.

Ah, if this man she called the white officer would only love—would only marry her!

When she entered her bedroom she had thrown herself down in a chair by the window, and had sat with her eyes on the moonlit sea, listening intently to what her old nurse said, yet thinking of and comparing Colonel Skene and the Grand Duke Paul Nikolaeff.

Skene had been the first man she had loved—he was a figure from the past; there had never been for her such a day as that on which he and she had walked among the larkspurs and roses; if he had deceived her, and had not really cared for her, that day, at least, remained; and what better had she had?—Nothing.

Idly sitting there, she recalled the events since her father's death. There was no pleasant incident to look back on. When she was a governess her life had been unendurable; the stage had been pleasanter,

but she had not there met men as good as Colonel Skene ; their kindness, which she had at first been thankful for, had only been for their own ends. She remembered how the adoration of the Portuguese financier had turned to disgusting abuse when she refused to go to Paris with him. Out of this past came the figure of the Grand Duke. It was impossible not to see that he loved her, and had treated her with princely generosity. His brown face, so like an Englishman's, came like a phantom between her and the sea. He had a kindly face, and was, without doubt, a good fellow ; he would also, without doubt, be kind and generous. She could recognise how well he had treated her in giving her the money to await him here, in providing her with beautiful clothes and jewels, in sheltering her from illness and ill-usage ; and she could not avoid the reflection that, in doing all these things, it was not altogether thought of self which had actuated him—he meant kindly to her, and had been very sorry for her. His face faded into the night. She was looking now over the sea to the distant lights of Trouville. Would she ever be there with him ? Why had Skene been sent to her just now, at the very moment when she was about to cast in her lot with that of people who were, more or less, outcasts ? Was there not fate in it ? Did it not open up to her a desperate hope that Skene might love her and marry her ? He had, in fact, said as much ; but what time was there ? and had he not in the past said just such tender things, and then

left her to fight her way in the world and end her life as she was about to end it now?

As she sat, she was calculating the time she had within which to do anything, since in two days—perhaps less—the Grand Duke would come for her, and then she would never see Skene again. She would at once send in a note to Skene making an appointment for the next day. On this next meeting with him would depend her future life. She would see whether he really loved her, or whether, as Judith suggested, he meant nothing ; if he cared to save her there would be time. She would at once return the Grand Duke's jewels and the money he had given her to pay her expenses, and would write to him ; she would explain.

As she looked feverishly about the room her eyes fell on a large Saratoga trunk. This box and its contents had been a source of satisfaction to her ; but that was before Colonel Skene had re-entered her life. She unlocked the trunk, and, stooping down, brought out some jewel-cases. The Grand Duke was a connoisseur in dress and in beauty ; the jewels he had given her had been rubies, diamonds, and topaz, to suit her beauty. The light from the one candle scarcely showed the glowing rose-colour of the rubies, but the diamonds and topaz in the half light glittered bravely. Paul Nikolaeff had taken pains in the selection of the designs ; there was a suggestion of the barbaric in the setting. There was an ornament for the hair in uncut rubies and

diamonds, a necklace of topaz and diamonds, and pearl drops—many beautiful things.

'I hope dese makin' yo' feel better, Miss Asta,' observed Judith's voice solemnly; 'I hope dese show yo' how wicked dese feelin's is.'

'Be quiet, Judith!' said Asta; 'I have had enough of you for one day. Bring me a pen and ink. I want to write.'

Judith complied sulkily. What did this mean? That something of a deleterious nature was in the wind she saw clearly.

Asta, with an anxious look, bit the top of her pen, and reflected on what she should say. Judith's warnings and opinions, though she would not have owned it, always carried considerable weight with her. She saw her old nurse's faults very dimly, and had been used from childhood to rely on her, and do what she told her, therefore the negress's caution as to the danger of the hotel servants gossiping to the Grand Duke's following was a warning not to be lightly disregarded. She knew, from a letter received that morning, that he was arriving in a couple of days' time, and reflected that he would probably send on a man in advance—not Salvator, but someone else, with his horses and belongings. But, whether any of his retainers arrived before him or not, the advice of the woman was keenly wise—not to give occasion for talk that would reach his ear. She would therefore see how the land lay tomorrow. Doubtless she would be able to talk to

Skene during the day ; but the appointment should be at night on the beach, away from the hotel possibilities of gossip ; she would slip away from the hotel and the ever-listening, ubiquitous Judith, and be happy in the summer darkness just as she had been to-night.

‘Take this note to the Colonel,’ Asta ordered. ‘And look here, Judith, play me no tricks ; that I may make sure you do go, bring me back an answer.’

When the negress had withdrawn from the room, Asta sat looking into space with a feverish excitement in her eyes. Through the half-open door she presently heard Miss Skene’s placid, well-bred tones in conversation with Judith.

‘Do tell your mistress, please, how very, very much I have enjoyed the concert—such a treat. But I will see her to-morrow, and personally thank her. And—er—I wonder if you will do me a kindness ? My brother has been ill ; I am afraid of damp clothes for him. Will you go down to the kitchen, and see that these are put to the fire, and—er—here is something for you.’

A sound from Judith indicated that a *douceur* had been received. Then she re-entered the room holding a letter, and carrying on her arm a sleeping suit.

‘Dis letter for yo’, Miss Asta,’ she said, tossing her head excitedly, ‘and dese here cloves, de Colonel’s ole lady, she say—take de chill off ob dem at de fire, please, she say—tee-hee!—dese pe’haps damp,

she say. G-r-r-r—damp ! I'se like ter let de whole ob de English Channel in on dem !'

The letter said :

' MY DARLING,

' Yes, on the beach at nine to-morrow evening ; but I shall see you before, shall I not ?

' Yours,

' G. S.'

CHAPTER XX

THE following day Colonel Skene saw Asta twice, but the meetings were brief, and he was struck by the fact that she seemed afraid of being seen with him in the hotel. He met her after breakfast on the terrace, but, after a few words, she ran away to her room, and, when he begged her to stay, she had reminded him that they were to meet that evening. None the less, since the passionate scene of last night, and in spite of this glamour of love, he had asked himself once or twice why she was here, and what events in her life could account for those altered circumstances. Curiously enough, he never for a moment supposed that the explanation would not be satisfactory ; in his eyes the moral atmosphere of Borth still surrounded her. He had last seen her in the Vicarage, when he had called a week after the ball. That meeting with her had been very distressing ; her father was dead, and he had not known it till Asta, in a black dress and weeping bitterly, had come to him in the drawing-room. As a matter of fact, she had at first refused to see him, and this, though he did not know it, accounted for the long wait.

He remembered that drawing-room, and the quarter of an hour spent in it before she arrived.

During that time he had learnt by heart every ornament in the room: the pictures of the Black Brunswicker and of Harmony, the mermaids and angels with the dead baby, Lord Palmerston in his frock-coat, standing with his coat-tails to the looking-glass, and his hair parted down the back and brushed to the ears; the piano, inscribed with the name of some Maidstone firm, with red-leaved Ancient and Modern hymn-books lying on it. This drawing-room, then, even if the questions he asked his mind about Asta had taken the shape of doubts, would have effectually settled them; it was impossible to have any serious misgivings as to the morals of any person occupying such a room. In this connection, the hymn-books were peculiarly satisfying; besides, Asta, though charming, with the charm of a panther, was a clergyman's daughter, and it was notorious that they were very good. It had always been this fact which had given such piquancy to her broken talk and passionate eyes.

Still, he asked himself, why would she not sit here on the terrace with him, foolish child? Who the devil cared what the hotel people thought? But, after a few minutes' reflection, this, too, he dismissed from his mind. Asta always was a queer girl; she probably had some idea of her own, or felt shy.

As he sat and smoked, his sister joined him on the terrace; she was bearing with her the small sack which contained the hearth-rug she was making, but Skene, in his present happy frame of mind,

watched its being unfolded without a trace of agitation.

'I know,' said she apologetically, 'that men don't like to see us at work, but I really must get on with this. I had meant to finish it last night, only I couldn't resist the concert.'

'And how did you like it, really?'

'Well, my dear, I'm delighted to have seen and heard her, though, I'm bound to say, my French did not permit me to catch the meaning of a great many of her songs; but as far as I understood them, dear, I thought her very good. A French lady sitting near us very kindly explained some of the words to us. Some of them one couldn't catch, and some one didn't *wish* to; but it's curious, George, how a thing comes home to one if one knows it. One of her songs is about a tipsy flower-girl who is taken in charge by the police; and, oh, George, it was inimitable! It was truth itself. I felt I was with cook. It seemed to me a touch of genius. Just that helpless droop of the arms, and the way she once stood against the dresser and told us we were not ladies! Miss Wallis, curiously enough, said it was so like their cook, she almost fancied she saw her. I think this proves Rejart to be a fine actress.'

'Well, I'm glad you had a pleasant evening.'

'I was thinking, George, that it would be nice to offer your new—or rather old—friend some little civility in return, to-day—a drive with us, or something of that sort. Has she done this place, do you know?'

'I haven't an idea, but it would be well, as you say, to ask her out. What do you think of a drive into the country ?'

'Delightful, dear, and to make even numbers, what do you say to a Miss Wallis ?'

'Capital !'

'By the way, is she married ? If not, how does she come to be here alone ?' asked Miss Skene presently.

'She's not married. I don't know, I'm sure, how she comes to be here. She was always an odd girl.'

'She has, I suppose, plenty of money ; but, even then, I wonder how her parents allow a nice-looking girl like that to go about—well, practically alone. For what is a nigger ?'

'This particular one is a confounded nuisance, that's what she is,' observed Skene, thinking of last night's interrupted bliss.

'Well, dear, anyhow, she can give her no moral support, and that is what a young, beautiful, and rich woman travelling on the Continent needs.'

'I have never tried to get moral support from a nigger, but I should think one couldn't,' murmured Skene placidly. 'But what's that you say about her being rich ? She's not rich, poor girl !'

'My dear George, not rich ! Why, look at her exquisite dresses—why, my dear George, the whole thing ! Do you think a woman goes in behind with that slinking, *kicked* look and then flies out at the foot if she doesn't cost a lot ? That is no ordinary dressmaker. I shouldn't wonder if it was Worth !'

'Worth! Rubbish, you're dreaming, my dear girl! She's certainly very prettily and—well, smartly dressed, but I think it's her exquisite face, really, that makes her clothes look nice. In fact, she told me once, that black nurse of hers makes all her frocks.'

Miss Skene shook her head with a smile.

'I am sure, George, you are mistaken,' she said; 'but putting that aside, her jewellery is so lovely too. Didn't you notice that brooch of rubies and brilliants? Besides, she tells me she is going on to Trouville.'

Colonel Skene was silent; he was thinking with intense satisfaction of Lord Palmerston, and of the red-leaved Ancient and Modern hymns on the piano at the Vicarage; his mind, therefore, was at rest.

'Poor little thing!' he said kindly; 'she's had a bad time of it lately. She's been governessing—awful brutes people have been to her; then she tried nursing, but she couldn't get on with that—had not the strength, so she told me; then had a try at the stage—that also she dropped.'

'And she didn't say what profession she had adopted now?'

'She didn't say,' replied Skene placidly.

Miss Skene went on with her hearthrug in silence. The border was being finished, and the whole thing would soon be complete and ready to adorn the Christ Church Bazaar. As the white fingers with the amethyst busied themselves with the coloured thrums, she wondered about Asta Steele, just as she

did about the fat Belgian lady with the child who sat in a line with them at *table d'hôte*; the eccentric doings of people on the Continent were part of the pleasures of travel. But when, presently, she went up to Miss Steele's room to suggest a drive, she was very disappointed to find that their new acquaintance had an engagement for that afternoon and could not go.

Thus it was that Skene saw very little of his recovered love during the day, and awaited the night with impatience. Meeting this woman now, for the second time in his life, seemed like fate. He would have denied that he was superstitious; none the less, he had such half-credited superstitions as a gambler possesses when he selects such and such a chair at the table, or binds his luck to such and such a number.

Far more alluring now than when he had left her, it seemed to him as if Fate had thrown her purposely in his path; and how strange it seemed that she should meet him as placidly as she had done! There had been a suggestion of assurance in her whole attitude, as of one who no longer demands anything, whose fate is decided, and over whom the world no longer has a control, and this attitude of assurance, curiously enough, exercised a fascination over him. Dressed now in dainty Paris dresses, and environed with the mystery attending her appearance at this foreign hotel, she appealed to him more strongly even than she had done before.

Legions of young ladies with their mammas would

not have given him the sensation that this meeting had. It was the old story. He had always hated responsibility, and disliked what made a demand on him; he had loved Mrs. Donnithorne because she flattered him, and made no demand, at least, on his liberty. Asta Steele, poor child! had made no demands in those first meetings, but at the ball there had been the weariness of looking after her; he had, in fact, placed her in a position which demanded his time and thought, and he had had other things to think of just then.

When, after the ball, he had called at the Vicarage and seen her, she had seemed to him, though grief-stricken, to take things very quietly. She was not angry with him—she was not angry with him now; she gave him, then and now, the impression of a patient, blind person trying to grope her way in a world none of whose roads she knew, not crying when she fell or hurt her foot against a stone, but with that strange melancholy on her face, taking it for granted that the world was what it was, and no desirable place.

It was close on nine o'clock, the time she had appointed for their meeting. Carrie was in the drawing-room talking to the English family, and Colonel Skene smoked his cigar, leaning on the balustrade, looking over the beach and thinking of Asta Steele. Save for a boat crossing to Trouville, not a sail was to be seen on the water. Skene looked at his watch, counting the minutes till he could go to meet her. He glanced along the shore;

far away, it extended into the soft darkness of a summer's night before the night has quite fallen, and it was dotted here and there with figures.

A sudden dread of losing her had seized him. How if he missed her? She had not said at what part of the beach they were to meet. Would she come at all? Her dress, the mystery of her appearance at this hotel, all betokened her a creature of caprice; she might very well change her mind, and, in that case, how find her again? The beach was wide, but the world was wider, and, beyond what she had told him of Trouville, she had said nothing of her future movements—nothing that would guide him to another meeting.

A faint sound of stringed music came from the Casino within the hotel and mixed with the murmurs of the wind and the sea. There was evidently a concert, and Skene could hear the soft notes of a woman's voice singing '*Ah che la morte*,' and the accompaniment, like sighs, by a violoncello. He looked at his watch again; he was to meet her at nine o'clock, and it was ten minutes to nine. He would go out and begin the search; he would require that time to explore the beach. Still smoking his cigar, he descended the sloping path that led to the beach and sea.

A light spray, half rain, half broken waves, blew in his face; he found himself calculating the chances as to whether this would be enough to keep her from the adventure, and wondering what should be his next move if he failed to meet her. Surely she

would come. He had turned to the left on leaving the hotel, and now came close on a figure which he had hoped might be Asta's. No; it was a girl of the servant class hurrying homeward. A few more stray people were dotted about, and he looked searchingly to see whether Asta had sought the shelter of the bathing-boxes.

The seashore had assumed the mournfully romantic air which it wears by artificial light, the orange of twinkling gas-jets making the cold, night sky appear a dim slate colour. Gazing backward, the façade of Frascati's looked cheery; he could see rooms lit up. She was not here. He would repass the hotel, and see if a light was in her room; but that, he suddenly reflected, would not tell him much, since her maid, the negress, might be sitting there in her absence. As he regained the beach before Frascati's, he saw that a light burned in her window; possibly she was in the hotel. He would first search the unexplored portion of the beach, and then return and make some excuse to write to her or see her.

A hundred yards past the hotel was a canvas and wooden shelter facing the sea; he looked into it as he passed, and a voice called to him.

She was standing before him, and he was holding her two little hands in his. She looked at him, unable to speak, mastered by a strong excitement, and, when she did, her lips quivered like a child's about to cry.

'What is the matter?' asked Skene tenderly, 'and why have you been avoiding me all day? Why

wouldn't you come for a drive? I was afraid that you wouldn't be here to-night. I searched out there'—indicating the stretch of beach at their left —‘and then I came back and looked up at Frascati's. A light burned in your window, and, oh! I was awfully afraid that you were up in your room, and that this mixture of rain and sea-fog had kept you in. What should I have done if you hadn't come?’

‘What would you have done?’ asked Asta gravely.

‘Are you wet, my beautiful?’ asked Skene tenderly, feeling the little scarlet sleeve of her dress, and retaining her small bare hand. ‘I think the sea-fog is drifting in. What would I have done? I would have searched for you all over the world till I found you. But you are not thinking of running away from me again, are you?’ It was characteristic of Skene that he really felt at the moment that this was a true description of the past. ‘Look here, Asta darling: I want a long, long talk with you; there are all sorts of things I want to say to you, and there are a great many things I want to ask you. First of all, you dear little mysterious creature, how do you come to be here?’

‘I am awaiting a friend, and we are going together to Trouville.’

‘And you have given over governessing, and nursing, and acting?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then, why, if you are with a friend at Trouville, should I not meet you there? Why should there be a mystery? Tell me, dear.’

'Is it necessary to tell you?' she demanded mournfully. 'If you love me, is not that enough? Is there any reason why you need to know? I am the same; I have done nothing to be ashamed of since we met.'

'Of course you have not; but why all this mystery? Last night, you spoke of someone for whom that negress of yours was watching. You would not say whom, but I ask you now. I tell you I love you; that gives me a right to know a little of your life.'

'I do not think the words "I love" give any right,' replied Asta. 'You told it me before in effect, and what came of it? "I love" can mean a great many different things.'

'In my mouth it can only mean the one thing,' replied Skene.

'You are just as you were in the old days,' she said fiercely. 'What does it all matter? what matter why I am here? Why do you question me? You asked me no questions last night.'

'Last night,' he returned gravely, 'you took me by surprise; you seemed to me my old charming love once more. There has always been about you a foreignness—a strangeness; and at first this place seemed a fitting background. That was last night; but, Asta, with daylight, and when one has reflected—Last night I thought of you till the morning hours, and, once away from your presence, I asked myself what you were doing here; but I believed that you would tell me when I asked you,

as I do now. Tell me, dear one! You say there is nothing to be ashamed of, and I am sure of it; then, why this mystery?

The sea-fog was shredding itself in a fine fret, and the night was clearing; not a sound was heard but the murmur of the waves. Asta's eyes were on the sea; darkness had hidden the brown-sailed boats; a few stars had come out; but the sea-fog had cleared the beach of summer night-loungers, and they were alone. Her face looked deadly pale in the moonlight, and she shivered.

'Asta,' he said, 'you were like no one I had ever seen before; you were like some strange foreign flower, whose colour and perfume one loves, but whose name one does not know. You drifted into my life and out again; but I have seen you many times since—many times you have come to me. I have seen you in the early mornings and in the twilights; once or twice I have seen eyes almost like yours, and once I heard a woman speak with that little click. I didn't love you exactly then; but I remembered you fondly as one remembers only one or two things in life—the things one has lost by one's own fault. All this seems little to tell you; but, Asta, by Heaven, it is the truth! Tell me, then: why do you hide anything from me when I say now I love you? Do you imagine anything will make me care for you less?'

Skene looked at her face in profile, searching it passionately, tenderly; but Asta felt that all was lost. She knew that this was no idle question Skene was

asking, but one to which he required an answer, and she feared that by the answer would she lose him for ever.

At that moment a rage possessed her—a rage at life and at the world—born of the knowledge that these Christians would punish her for this sin of hers which she contemplated, while practising, so she considered, far worse themselves, and of passionate regret that Skene should be the instrument of torture put into their hands at the last to wound her with. She was silent, mastered by a terrible excitement, and when at last she spoke, it was in a changed voice.

‘ You do not know,’ said she, ‘ how hard it has been for a person to live. I have thought of you often in these two years; but have you ever given me a passing thought, or cared whether I was alive or dead? You did not even care enough for me to wonder what I was doing here, or to ask how a beggar like myself came by these jewels. How do you think I have lived? Tell me. What do you think the world is like? The paths of it are full of dirt and mire. Tell me—did you not, that day at the Vicarage, see me starting out alone into it? Did you not know what a dirty, cruel place it was, and that I should be quite alone? Well, what did you think would happen? Listen: I will tell you what has happened. I am very sick of my life—very tired of the shabby, dirty places of life—and your Christians have beaten and wounded me. I do not any longer belong to them; for they and their false gods will do nothing

for me, so I have left them. But I am alive and young, and I cannot die, and so I have sought a hole to lie down in—a place where I shall have rest, and where I do not think I shall be struck or beaten any more. I am here awaiting the Grand Duke Paul Nikolaeff; he should have been with me now, but at the last moment he was called to Paris. He comes to-morrow, and then I leave this, and we shall, I dare say, never meet again.'

'Good God, Asta!'

'Why are you so much astonished? What did you think I should do, and in what, after all, shall I be different from your Mrs. Donnithorne?'

He paused, considering. In what would she be different? Mrs. Donnithorne had suddenly become intensely religious, and was now settled in a cathedral town, of which she had become an ornament. Instead of the excitement of intrigue, she had the exaltation of ritual, but he seldom saw her now. He had none but kind feeling for Mrs. Donnithorne, but she was *passée*, and no longer appealed to him. He again looked out to sea. The lights were blinking on the far shore at his left. He was suddenly aware that the only difference was that Mrs. Donnithorne's sin was draped, whereas Asta's would not be. That, looked at dispassionately, was the only difference.

'My God, Asta, you are not going to leave me in that way!' said he passionately. 'You say you are going over to Trouville with this man. You must not!' He paused, unable to proceed. 'How

did this happen ?' he asked at length blankly. ' How, in God's name, did such a thing happen ?'

' How did it happen ? I will tell you. There was a Mrs. Vardon, who took me to be half-nurse, half-governess to her children, as the eldest child was an invalid. I suited her perfectly. She was just such a woman as your Mrs. Donnithorne ; she had a husband whose interest it was to see nothing. She cared nothing for the three children nor for me. She lived abroad. We were in Paris, at a hotel. She took rooms for the children and for me at the very top of the hotel ; there was no lift. I was very ill there ; she did not care how ill I was as I crept up and down those endless stairs. Ah, those red-carpeted stairs ! How well I remember the white paint at the sides of them ! . . . It was those stairs, I think, that completed my ruin. One night my illness grew worse ; I had a bad attack of congestion of the lungs. Sitting up in bed and trying to breathe, I thought hopelessly of what was to be the end. I suffered horribly in seeing myself become worn. Yes, my beauty was passing from me ; it was that thought which gave me the horrible nightmare that came to me at that time whenever I slept—that, and a recollection of the past, which now haunted me. Living near my aunts' at St. Lucia, there had been a certain Madame Mendoza, and it was this woman whom I now always saw in those hideous dreams of mine. She was, like myself, of dark blood, and Judith had very often gossiped to me about her. She had been very beautiful, but at thirty, when, as a child, I had

seen her, she had been bloated, horrible-looking, like an old woman, and I had always believed the gossips who said that the women of dark blood, like myself, aged early, and became like that. Her bloodshot eyes looked at me through the delirium of sleep, and appeared shocking to me; her bloated figure, as I remembered it in its loose bodice, took monstrous shapes. Was I coming to this? Yes, perhaps, but surely not before I had enjoyed a little youth and life! I took to brooding eagerly on the idea of some better life, and that small, horrible, stifling room at the hotel became a hell for me. That dreadful night I shall never forget: I lay there on the hard bed and could not sleep; the children, too, who shared my room, were restless—the poor things were too hot to sleep on their uncomfortable beds, and the invalid one was in pain, so that I got up and comforted him. I was terribly ill in the morning; blood was on my handkerchief, and that blood, when I saw it, terrified me. I dressed the children and sent them down, but I remained in my room, too ill to descend. Mrs. Vardon came up. She was frightened, then, and sent for the doctor. He was an Englishman, very young—little more than a student. . . .

‘After that I was very ill indeed—nearly dead—but I recovered, and one day he said to me:

“Your friend, the Grand Duke Paul Nikolaeff, is very pleased to hear you are better.”

‘My friend the Grand Duke! I knew no one—had not a friend in the world; Judith, even, I could not keep with me. What did this mean?

“‘He has asked after you every day,’ said the young doctor, ‘and bids me tell you how rejoiced he is at your recovery.’”

‘We were sitting in the window when he said this. The flowers in the windows of the opposite house were blossoming, and seemed to put a hope of life and pleasure in my heart.

‘Then I remembered who this was. An old Russian lady occupied a suite of rooms at the hotel, and her nephew, the Grand Duke Paul Nikolaeff, was in the habit of visiting her there—a pleasant-looking man with a face like an Englishman. He would drive a four-in-hand up to the hotel, and the children had often stopped to admire his dogs—two beautiful boar-hounds. I then recalled how, one day, just before my illness, when I was toiling up those terrible red-and-white stairs, he had wheeled an arm-chair out on the landing, and bade me rest.

‘A wild excitement was in my heart. It is idle to say that I did not think of the Grand Duke, and that the reflection that he was a man of rank and means, and thus could, if he would, help me, had not some part in those dreams. You can imagine it, and, seeing me here, can imagine the rest.

‘When I was better he came to see me often. He was very kind—he is the only person who has been kind—and to-morrow I go with him beyond the water there. That is all. What more is there to say? No, there is nothing more’ (tenderly) ‘except for you and me to say good-bye. There is nothing more in this life than what we see. We must make

the best of it ; we are only clay. That Cross which you and the others believe in cannot make us any different. I no longer ask it anything, as I used. I would have prayed for a different life from mine, but I know it would not grant my prayers. Then, I must take what I see. I am tired ; I want to rest, and not be kicked and cuffed any more. The followers of this Cross of yours beat each other and are beaten. I am weary ; I have had enough.'

Colonel Skene was silent.

'Look over there,' she said with a half-sob. 'Do you see that nest of stars on the sea-line on our left ? Those are the lights of Trouville. Those lights burn only for a short time ; their season is very short, but they burn very brightly. They have a brief space to glitter in—a short season—and then they are put out, and a person looking over the waters can only see one or two steady lights—the lights which are in actual homes where people are living, and are happy. I shall be part of that glitter presently. Paul Nikolaeff's villa will give out its light across the night, and, looking over the waters, you will know that I am there. Then, if you care to give me a passing thought, you will remember that I am one of those glittering sparks that flash for a while across the water—think of me then, and feel a little sorry for me.'

'Asta, you shall not go !'

He had clasped her two hands, but she had risen, and was preparing to retrace her steps towards the hotel.

'I must go,' said she mournfully. 'Why, if you

cared to save me, did you not come before? Come, let us return. The sea-mist drifts; your coat-sleeve is wet, and you have this fever on you—it is very unwise. And what can we arrive at by our talk? Nothing! Come, let us return. Judith will be very angry with me.'

'Why?'

'She fears that the Duke may hear gossip about you and me.'

Asta had risen, and was standing outside the shelter.

'I shall not let you go, Asta,' said Skene. 'It is too horrible. Think of it; what will be the end?'

She laughed, and the laugh startled Skene more than anything she had said. There was an echo of barbarism in it. Hundreds of years ago, before he had lived his easy, happy, Society life, and before poor Asta's soul had been bound down in the village of Borth, her people had laughed thus as they decked themselves with scarlet and orange. They had done what was best at the moment, as she was doing now. Skene thought again of Solomon's Song; he was far away in thought from Frascati's, far away from his sister and the hearthrug.

In the confusion of his soul he was trying to think, but the thoughts chased each other, and, through all, he heard the soft laugh Asta had given. He was wondering what he had come prepared to say to her, and suddenly he realized that he had intended to propose marriage to her, had intended to make her sister-in-law to Miss Skene! Then he thought

of the hearthrug, of Miss Skene's interests in life, and of the fact that he was to settle down presently and become a county magistrate and generally respectable. All this would be impossible with Asta.

On the other hand, beyond all doubt, he loved Asta ; he had never allowed the world's opinion to stand between him and his desires, and he would not now. If Asta were steeped in wickedness, what was it to him ? He loved her. Many women were very good, many were entirely respectable, but they had not this woman's mouth and eyes, and, in his own soul, some instinct told him that she was just the same Asta as he had left. But even if it were not so, he was not in the habit of asking the world's opinion ; he had too long been permitted to set it at defiance to demand now what it thought of his wife.

If he did not mention the word 'marriage,' it was because this word had always had a terror for him.

But Asta Steele beside him in the darkness did not know this. From the moment when her secret had been wrested from her she had felt that all was finished, and that Skene would not think of her any more.

They had reached Frascati's. The balcony on which he had leaned, thinking of Asta, was empty ; she crossed it and entered the hotel before him. Within, one or two waiters were flitting about ; as they ascended the stairs they met another. Skene was sensible that the men eyed him and his companion with curiosity ; their glances annoyed him.

They were once more on the landing which had

been the stage of this drama, and were standing before the two doors opening into their rooms.

'Thank God,' said Skene passionately, 'that I have not lost you! Why did I ever let you go out of my life? Listen, my darling. I cannot say now what we had better do, but I will decide, and I will let you know to-night.'

His face was happy. He had, as usual, not said anything definite; but he knew what he meant to do, and that was very definite indeed.

CHAPTER XXI

COLONEL SKENE had not said one word of marriage, but it was characteristic of him that, when the door had closed on Asta, he should ask himself anxiously what he had said; he had been so used in his intrigues to hair-breadth escapes that a certain alertness was his custom in dealing with women. At the same time, he had every intention of asking her to marry him, and he lighted a cigarette and sat at the window, making up his mind what he should say. He tried to dismiss the thought of his two sisters, and of Barminster, where he would live presently when he left the army; but he thought, in spite of himself, once or twice of the hearthrug and Christ Church Bazaar.

Then he sat down to write. Colonel Skene's epistolary style was not verbose; his letters to women had always been composed of very few words, and this was no exception; and though his letters to married women had often contained the expression of a passionate regret that he could not marry the lady whom he was at the moment addressing, he had never in his life suggested any wish to take to himself any woman whom it was legally possible to marry.

He had now, however, at last, after forty years,

written a proposal, and he went over the composition carefully, dotting the *i*'s and putting two extra loops on the *r*'s wherever the word 'marriage' occurred. When he had finished it, though he felt a pride in it, he still experienced a little shrinking from giving the letter at once to Asta, and thus sealing for ever his own fate. Moreover, he felt sure that she knew the contents of the letter. Had he not, in effect, asked her to marry him? What other construction could his words and actions bear? Certainly, there was no hurry. So, instead of taking it at once in person to Asta's door and giving it into her hands, he sat down, and having lit another cigarette, smoked it by the open window.

Asta had shut her window because of the rain, and he could not, as he usually did, hear the murmur of Judith's voice. A great deal, he was aware, had to be arranged. He was sensible that the break with the Grand Duke Paul Nikolaeff would be a difficult one. He was also sensible that, with his sister here with him, the situation to-morrow, when Asta's lover arrived, would be an almost impossible one. He sat smoking and thinking, and, as he sat, he was sensible of a little noise like a gentle tapping at the door. Carrie was long in bed, and doubtless asleep. He had seen her well-made English boots at her door when he said good-night to Asta. It was not she.

He went to the door and softly opened it. A light burnt in the corridor, and showed him the dark figure of Asta's negro maid. She put her finger on her lips

with a gesture of silence, and stepping into his room, closed the door. There was a pleasant, genial expression on the woman's face. She held between a black finger and thumb a ruby-coloured glass encased in a delicate filigree of gold; and while maintaining silence, smiled from ear to ear on Colonel Skene.

'Have you a message?' he asked.

'Miss Asta tell me come here and ask if any letter for she. She say, too: "Tell de Colonel drink dis wiv my love;" she say dis plenty good for de chills an de fever.'

'What is it, Judith?'

'Dis port wine. She take a glass she self when she come in and she pour dis into dat very same glass. "Take dis to de Colonel," she say, "and tell he I leave a kiss in dis for he. Tell he dis make he sleep, for de more he sleep de better, for dere a good deal ob tings to be done before de Grand Duke come in de mornin'."

'Anything else?'

'She say: "Tell de Colonel I'se got de fever ob love for he." Ah! an' dis true. She say to me yesterday: "Dis Colonel draw me heart like de sun draw de water-brooks." Oh-he! she say: "I'se gived all ob me love to de Colonel."

'She has sent me no letter?'

'Miss Asta want to write yo' a letter, but I say to Miss Asta, "Yo' go to sleep. I tell all dis to de Colonel, and if de Colonel write a letter, den I bring it."

'I have written to her. Tell me, since you know

her affairs, when does the Grand Duke come in the morning ?'

' Salvator, de Duke's man, he here already ; but he say de Duke not come till late to-morrow. He say business keep de Duke. Dere be plenty ob time for yo' an' Miss Asta, I sees to dat. I no friend to dis disreputible Duke. One marriage in de Church ob England worf twenty dukes.'

' That's right. Not a word, though, to this man Salvator. I will see her early to-morrow morning. She must—— I have said in this note what she is to do. You say she is asleep ? then do not wake her, but see she gets this the first thing to-morrow. What ? I am to drink this, am I ? Well, it tastes good.'

Colonel Skene finished the glass, and, setting it down, took up the only note in which he had ever written the words 'marry me,' and gave it to the woman. A little sigh escaped him as he did so. He watched, with a half-fascination, her narrow-palmed hands, with their fingers lighter inside than out, holding the letter.

' My love to her,' said Skene ; ' and tell her I have drunk her wine.'

' Good luck to yo' and to yo'r love, soldier officer !' returned Judith—'good luck to yo'!' She had taken the little cup, and it hung by one of the fingers of the hand that held the note. There was a curious expression on the negress's face—a lurking smile on the thick lips. ' Sleep sound, sleep well ; and when de mornin' come shinin' in, yo' wake an' see what a

happy gentleman yo' is, and dat dese dukes ain't nowhere wiv yo'.'

'Good-night, Judith,' said Skene kindly.

The woman departed. He heard the next door closed softly, and silence settled on his room once more. He was perfectly happy; and, now the die was cast, he was glad the note had gone. To make plans for the following morning was his next thought. He had arranged in the note to see Asta at 8.30. They must be away from the hotel when the Grand Duke arrived. Miss Skene must be given some explanation of their sudden change of plans, and a letter must be left behind for the Grand Duke. Yes, it was horribly involved and complicated. Miss Skene was the awkward factor in the matter. How was the affair to be explained to her? The more Colonel Skene thought of her, the more acutely he became aware of the necessity of preparing for her an edited account of Asta's connection with the Grand Duke; and he was busy doing this in his own mind as he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXII

COLONEL SKENE was looking very fixedly at the white window curtains of his room ; he stared at their design, portraying baskets of grapes outlined against the blue sky ; he was sensible of a headache and a feeling of nausea ; then he started up from his pillow.

He had a curious sensation of something having taken place over-night—something he should remember. Yes, he had arranged to meet Asta at half-past eight this morning. What time was it now ? Was it late ? He looked at his watch—a quarter to one. The thing must have stopped, he thought ; no, he could hear it ticking. What had happened ? Where was Asta ? How had he slept till now ?

With a feeling of utter consternation he looked out into the corridor. Asta's door was open—he had never before seen it standing open. A sense of coming misfortune was weighing him down ; he hurriedly dressed, and in a few minutes was out of his room.

Yes, Asta's door was open ; the room had a dismantled air, and two chamber-maids conversed in murmurs as they dusted it. Looking up, they saw the English gentleman gazing in as if distraught.

Presently one of them left the room with a pile of sheets on her arm, and Colonel Skene asked her what had become of the lady who had been in that room.

'*Madame est partie,*' said the woman, and went up the corridor singing.

Skene stood within the door. It was a light, cheerful room, hung with a white shining paper, and with mirrors let into the wall. He remembered, afterwards, the glaring whiteness of the room with horror, and the bed in its recess, with its mattress of checked blue and white. But there was a hideous confusion in his mind.

He was standing there when his sister came in. His back was turned to the door, but he heard her voice, and she bustled in and stood beside him in her boat-shaped hat, looking pleasant and wholesome and British.

'Oh, here you are—up at last!' she said. 'I looked into your room after breakfast when you didn't come down, but you seemed so soundly asleep that I didn't wake you. Yes, I see you have discovered that your newly-found friend is gone. A gentleman came for her, and they and the black woman went off some hours ago. I said good-bye to her, poor little thing! and, George, I asked if she left any message for you. She said there was no message, but to say good-bye; somehow she seemed very sad at leaving. . . . You don't look very refreshed by your sleep, George; I'm afraid you have got another chill. You know, dear, I always have considered

that Jaegers would be more healthful wear than cotton, and I do wish, at least, you wouldn't wear cotton sleeping suits. You know, George, you are no longer a boy. You are—what age are you? And Dr. Broughton says that after forty—'

Colonel Skene, standing there in the glaring sunlight, did not look like a boy; his face was pallid, his figure looked thin; he was watching a steamer which was crossing in the direction of Trouville.

Trouville lay over there to the left—a little, indistinct cloud on the horizon; but to-night it would be gay and glittering, and the light of his poor, lost love would flame like a falling star above the sea-line.

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